

HERO'S TORCH



19

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by 19

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Children

dys-to-pi-a (dîs-to¹pê-e) noun

1. *An imaginary place or state in which the condition of life is extremely bad, as from deprivation, oppression, or terror.*

2. *A work describing such a place or state: "dystopias such as Brave New World"*

It was almost silent there, in the basement of the church. Faded chains of colored paper hung in loops from the low ceiling, and copies of pages from Christian coloring books were tacked to bulletin boards on the peeling walls.

It was almost silent, except for the hum of electric fans and the crying of about thirty children.

It always happened, the crying. They would be sitting on parent's laps, clinging to hands, some of them worrying at bottles or toys. There was no noise, nothing happening at all, only waiting--but without fail, one would start to cry.

Then two, then ten.

Sometimes there were mothers, fathers crying too, pale and shaking, endlessly hushing their children, eyes moving frantically from door to child to door again.

Oberon stood outside the door. One of his attendants moved to open it for him; he froze the man with a slight motion of his hand. He stood in the hallway, listening to the muffled terror beyond the door. He turned so that none of them could see his eyes drifting closed, his lips pressing tight to keep the corners from turning upwards.

He could hear his entourage behind him, fidgeting almost soundlessly, one of them daring to make a slight cough. Their impatience was irrelevant to him. He waited, until he was absolutely still, inside and out, then turned his head, and ordered with his eyes. Shaking, his attendant opened the door.

The Septarch never touched anything.

Not here.

He stepped inside, flanked by his bodyguards. They were only there for the sake of appearance. He didn't need them. No one had tried to physically attack him since the incident on the Lazarus outpost sixteen years earlier. He had taken care of that one himself, before his guards had even known what was happening.

The crying stopped, as if someone had thrown a switch. He allowed himself a thin quick smile at that. It always stopped, exactly that way. All the eyes in the room dropped to the floor. No one looked at him. No one moved. They didn't dare.

"All of them passed?" he asked. The question was unnecessary, and deliberately directed at no one in particular. He did this to enjoy the silent not-me struggle among his servants. There was only so much time, too. God forbid he should physically turn to them and ask again. An offense like that always meant blood.

"Yes, Lord Septarch. These are the ones that have been found suitable in the preliminary tests," one of them stammered finally.

Oberon did not look at him. He felt the man waiting, and he made a small cruel motion as if he might speak again. He was certain they weren't even breathing.

He nodded, finally. There was, of course, no sigh of relief. They knew better than that.

The little family groups were seated in folding chairs lining the walls, little clumps of mother-father-child. The trembling set in and passed around the room like a chain reaction. He noted that. It was a machine, this world, turning in perfect sync at his slightest decision. Everything was still exactly as it should be.

Except, of course, that there was nothing here that fascinated him. He had seen these same children, hundreds of times, or their twins, and the repetition had bleached this of any amusement it had once held.

He tired of the game, suddenly, feeling the odd sense of deflation that meant he had better finish this, and quickly.

He made his choices almost at random, not even gesturing, trusting in his servants to follow the motion of his eyes. "This one. That one. These two," he said, already turning to leave.

The same guard that had spoken to him ran to open the door wider for him, desperate that not even the cuff of his pants brush against the wood.

The screams were beginning.

Behind him, a woman collapsed, making a sound like shorn metal, her face buried in her husband's lap, her hands hanging limp, brushing the tile floor. Her little girl was the first one he had chosen, a tiny thing with white-blond hair and curious eyes. He already knew he wouldn't use her in any significant way. He had chosen for the joy of being able to do so.

The Septarch was escorted through the hallway, out a back door and into the sleek waiting electric car. He never took his hands from the pockets of his leather coat. He never needed to. Not here.

He did not turn his head to watch the transport being loaded behind him. He had never been interested in background details.

Cayle was sitting beside him, already pressing pills into his hand. He took them, waved away the offer of water. "I hate this planet," he muttered, staring out the one-way window.

"There's only one more."

The Septarch nodded.

"Did you want to stay here, or--"

"No," he said, shortly. "Just get me to the spaceport."

He leaned his forehead against the synthetic glass. Maybe he would arrange some kind of contest, a game of wits or persistence or creativity for the little ones to struggle through. Something more amusing than all that waiting and crying. Something that might fascinate him, if only for a while.
isolation

Two hundred miles away, an act of sabotage was in progress.

"Radio...live transmission," Leander muttered to himself, around a mouthful of wires.

He was a narrow sculpture of bone and thin young muscle, and he was doing his best to squeeze himself against the wall, where the shadows were thickest. He knew he had two minutes and twelve seconds until the security robot passed by again, plenty of time, but there was no predicting a passing junkie or cop. That was up to the random. The only way to combat the random was to have a plan, and stick to it. So he kept his head down and kept singing, because the song was two minutes long, and when he reached the end of it he would have twelve seconds to escape.

"Listen to the silence...let it ring on..."

His bag was pulling hard on his shoulder. He spent a precious two seconds adjusting it, pulled on the damn too-short wire slowly and firmly until it surrendered a half-inch of slack.

"Bang," he muttered, grinning, and touched copper to copper, and a spark stung his wrist where the gloves didn't reach. He heard a whirring deep inside the building, and the metal security shield over the windows around the corner rolled itself up with a screech.

He skidded around the corner, smashed the window with his bag, grabbed as many assorted circuit boards and passcards as he could, stuffed them into his poor abused backpack, fumbled into his pocket, grabbed the carefully rigged gadget, and stuck it on a jutting shard of supposedly unbreakable glass. All of this was more or less one practiced motion.

He ducked into the alley on the other side of the building, groping past the stolen merchandise in his bag for a smooth cylinder. He knocked off the plastic cap and sprayed three sloppy sixes on the brick wall, in dripping neon red, dropped the can and scaled the wall at the end of the alley. It was topped with barbed wire that had long since rusted into a pathetic joke. It smeared his school uniform with orange, and tore the knee of his pants. That was fine. Once, he'd torn open the inside of his wrist, and had staggered home with his sock tied around the wound.

He ran two blocks, checked his watch. He waited, counting under his breath. He was sure the robot would be in the blast zone, too. The state police could have that little favor for free. It wouldn't bother them much. The factories churned the damn copbots out by the hundreds. They were designed and built by the lowest bidder, and it

was not uncommon for them to fall out of the air and lie sparking and twitching on the sidewalk, shrieking garbled codes and sending all kinds of film to any computers within sensor range.

Radio. Live transmission.

It wasn't much of a bang. Just a kind of a whoosh, and a sort of pressure that vaguely ruffled his hair. No alarm. They deserved it, having a goddamned system that was ten years out of date. Wire, for God's sake. Who in the hell still used wire?

He was breathing hard, not really out of breath, just running hard and fast on adrenaline and triumph. It was almost too easy. He almost felt sorry for the idiots.

District Seven Technological Supply was over.

He had hacked the school computer system, and while aimlessly sifting through the payout records, he'd found out that these were the bastards that supplied all the schools in the quadrant.

The Council would not have been amused to learn that the Tri-Six Terrorist was a fourteen-year-old boy.

Leander ducked and turned and doubled back. He let himself edge into a fast walk, took a side trip into another alley and pulled the two bricks out of his bag and tossed them in a recycle dump.

He checked his watch again. Damn.

He had to be at school in less than four hours, and it was an hour's walk home.

"Fucking cops. It would have been nice to have my damn bike," he muttered to himself. He'd built a kind of bastardized motor scooter for exactly this kind of mission, with completely silent engines, and on his test run the police had spotted him and seized it as an unauthorized vehicle. He hadn't even known about that law.

He unzipped the outer pocket of his bag, pulled out four pills, and chewed them. It left his mouth gritty and tasting of sulfur, but he sang anyway.

"Waiting for our sign.....sign..."

Before the Revolution, the place he was walking through would have been called Italy.

He crept into the house, tiptoed up the stairs. One of them creaked, and he froze, waiting to hear the chime of his parents' door opening. He counted to one hundred. Nothing.

He made it into his room and keyed the door locked behind him, dropped his bag into his battered chair and fell across his bed.

Safe.

He peeled off the leather gloves, reached over and buried them under a pile of dirty school uniforms, wriggled out of his clothes and hid them in the same place. He had convinced his mother that the rust stains—and occasional bloodstains—were due to his habit of poking around in junkyards. She knew his predilection for building things that could have been called machines or sculptures, depending on how well they worked, and whether she believed him or not, she didn't question him about it.

His room was a lair, reeking of sandalwood and pot. He had drawn and painted on every inch of the walls, the ceiling, a solid mural of blacks, browns, red and gray and flashes of occasional magenta and green. It was more or less abstract, with occasional eyes, teeth, snakes, and flames, except for a strange angel over his bed. The bed was a snarl of mismatched sheets, a Republic of Earth flag crumpled at the footboard, the blue cross on a white background twisted into a crooked glyph.

It was the only place on Earth that was easy on his eyes.

The drugs were playing a quick mean voodoo drum in his skull. He groped under his bed for a little gizmo that was supposed to be a perpetual motion machine, managed to break off one of the counterweights, and dropped it again with a sigh.

He stared up at the mutant angel on the ceiling over his bed, reached over his head for his earphones, and waited. He'd programmed the computer to turn on his stereo three minutes after he keyed his room closed.

The music slammed into him, violent counterpoint to the headache unfolding in his temples. He kicked at the flag, squashing it even farther down until it was crammed between the bedframe and the mattress, keeping company with a compass, two computer disks, and the gas mask he'd outgrown when he was eight.

He closed his eyes and tried to wind himself into a dream, something with a lot of explosions, with his least favorite teachers and the school security force as key victims in the scenario. It unraveled quickly, into a barrage of disconnected images, and a vague plan to try and hack the comm net for the quadrant, and link it into his stereo. He drifted off in a spiral of still shots, of his Humanities teacher lying in a hallway with her hands crammed against her ears, while the school's public address system blasted the ancient rock group Ministry at decibel levels that were inhumanly cruel.

Two hours later, his alarm beeped in his ears.

He dragged himself out of bed, pulled on his last clean uniform, emptied the stolen equipment out of his bag and stuffed it under his bed. He ate an amphetamine, wandered into the bathroom and brushed his teeth, and snuck down the stairs as quietly as he could with his eyes half-closed.

He got lucky. He stumbled out of the house without either of his parents seeing him.

There was a small saccharine panic in his chest after the door had closed behind him. Sunlight was splattering down on him. So much space. So many eyes.

He had his backpack, made beautiful with electrical tape, with wire and obscure stickers and black graffiti. It was juju.

He was safe.

He groped in the maw of his bag for the mask, buckled it over his head. The air through it was bland and redundant; it, too, was begging to be unraveled. Hydrogen. Nitrogen. Carbon monoxide.

He missed the smell of gasoline, illegal now for years, that he had found sometimes when he was small, in junkyards. When he was three they'd had a neighbor who had an antique car with rubber wheels and a gasoline engine. The man and his car were gone, now, the man long

since sent to reconditioning camp, the car dismembered for scrap metal.

All this, and the planet is still toxic. We might as well have kept the gasoline, Leander thought, and breathed in deep and quickly, listening to the hiss of the filter in his mask.

blue murder machine

When Leander was twelve, he'd been allowed to choose an elective class. He'd picked Section 47--Creative Arts. He'd expected the scheduling counselor to give him some script about the class being full, or the time conflicting with his required credits. Instead, she'd keyed in his code, and printed his schedule and handed it to him without a word.

He remembered walking in and just standing in the doorway of the classroom, amazed. No desks. No computers. There were tables, with two chairs at each one, across from one another, and at each table there were two huge sheets of real white paper. Beside that, there was a box of colored pencils, the good kind that made thick rich lines, with soft lead that didn't scratch.

Each seat had an index card with a name. He found his, tucked his bag under his feet, and chewed his lip, impatiently. The kids came in, one by one. A skinny kid with hair the color of dirt sat across from him. He glanced at Leander disdainfully. Leander gave him such a vicious look in return that he looked away.

The teacher came in, a heavy woman with her hair twisted into a lump at the nape of her neck, in standard issue teacher's gray. "Well, class," she said. "For your first day, let's have a little fun. I want you to draw something from the Bible. It can be anything--Daniel and the lions, Adam and Eve, whatever you'd like."

Well. He'd expected that. There was plenty in the Bible he could stand to draw. There was enough material in Revelation alone to keep him busy for the entire semester.

Leander had already picked up a bright blue pencil.

He drew without stopping, without erasing, for almost an hour. The classroom vanished, and he was in a place where there was nothing but the paper, and the evolving lines. He wasn't thinking, wasn't even drawing consciously. It was one of the best times, when it just worked perfectly, when he wasn't creating so much as he was translating.

The class was almost over, and the teacher was going around the room, looking at each kid's work, offering suggestions, praise. He vaguely knew that there was more talking than there had been. He didn't look up. He started drawing more quickly, knowing that he

would lose a lot of it once the bell rang.

She stopped behind Leander's desk. He didn't notice her, and he didn't stop drawing until she snatched the pencil out of his hand.

The class was instantly silent.

"What is this?" she demanded, her voice shaking.

It was Jesus. The messiah was in a strange costume of dark shiny blue. He had black lipstick, and was bolted to a steel cross, with rivets through his wrists and ankles. His face and chest were studded with circuit boards. There were hundreds of meticulously drawn wires invading his flesh, a tiny blue wound at each point of penetration.

The teacher grabbed Leander's chin and forced his head back. "Is that supposed to be funny? How dare you draw something like that?"

Leander was shaking. He had never had a teacher yell at him in all his life. He had no idea what he'd even done wrong. Was she jealous? Had the class already ended, with him just sitting here?

He opened his mouth, and said, "I'm not finished. Can I have my pencil back?"

She let him go, drew back her hand and slapped him so hard he nearly fell out of his chair. It erased any coherent thought left in his brain. No one had ever hit him before, not outside of street fights with other kids. He couldn't figure out whether he was supposed to hit her back, or what.

He was looking down at his sketch again, and her hand came down over his shoulder. Wrinkled it. Snatched it.

He sat very still. Everyone was staring at him. None of them dared to say anything.

And Leander exploded.

He put his hands under the table, and slammed it upward, as hard as he could. It flipped over completely, crushing the kid across from him to the floor in a tangled blizzard of table, chair, and paper. Colored pencils clattered against the tile. He did this on his way to standing up. "That's mine--"

The teacher grabbed him, yanked his arm so hard that pain flared in the socket of his shoulder, into his ribs. She dragged him over his chair and out of the room, holding his sketch in her free hand away from her body, as though it might get her dirty.

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Knocking over the table had earned him a beating on his bare skin, with a wooden paddle an inch thick. It was delivered in front of the entire school, after his sketch had been displayed and loudly condemned as Satanic. The bruises ran from his waist to the backs of his knees, and they had taken more than a month to fade.

It still left a bright raw fury in his stomach. He could still see them, a sea of faces, as he stood there watching the principal wave his sketch, shouting. Another man had been holding Leander hard by the shoulder with one hand. He'd had the paddle in his other hand.

That was the first time he'd thought boy, would I ever like to smash bang you back once or twice.

The drawing had earned him six months of priority counseling. This was a pleasant State euphemism for psychological torture. For one hundred and eighty days, eleven or twelve hours a day, he had been locked in a room with four of them, all of them shouting at him at once. After the first time he covered his ears they taped his hands to the chair.

In the name of Jesus.

The brainwashing after that was a vague white blur. Hell on Earth. The only reason it hadn't broken him, he figured, was because they had been making no logical sense at all. Circular reasoning, and all of it led back to Jesus, and that would make him see his sketch again, burning in the air just in front of his eyes. Jesus, the entire goddamned reason he'd been there in the first place.

They had put him on various drugs, on doses so heavy that he had barely been able to hold his head up, let alone understand anything they were saying. Finally, he had taken to saying, sure, okay, fine, no matter what they had just said to him. He lied his way through a written evaluation they'd given him, and they'd let him go. Cured.

He sighed. The vengeance fix of blowing up the Tech supply was

already wearing thin. Maybe tonight. If he ate a little more speed...

He walked towards the school, towards eight hours of faded women hammering at him with incomprehensible facts, or even worse, morals and ethics and never-ending ravings about Christ.

I want more than this, he thought.

hypocrisy

The school was a crouched, ugly tumor, fenced in with spirals of vicious wire decorating the upper edge of ten-foot rusted fences. Almost all of the gates were locked, excessive loops of chain the color of shit wound around the bars, into a thick clot where the padlocks were hopelessly choked. You had to go in the front gate, past a little clump of guards. Leander wondered who it was they thought actually wanted to get inside.

He remembered just in time, and took off his watch and stuffed it into his bag. You weren't allowed to wear any kind of jewelry except the government-issue wristunits, a combination of watch, ID, and locator device that everybody had to have. He'd smashed his again in a not-so-accident in physical training section, and he'd conveniently given the wrong address for them to ship the replacement to. So far, they hadn't caught on.

He slunk along to his first class. School started with homeroom, with prayers and roll call and usually the meting out of punishments. He passed a group of girls conversing in horrified whispers. "Tri-Six...again, last night...they say he's from a cult in Quadrant Eight...he did it because last night was the anniversary of the death of this devil-worshipper. Crowley."

Was it really? Leander bit back a grin. He made a mental note to search for Crowley info on his computer. One of the girls must have seen his expression, because they all got quiet and stared at him. He ignored them. If he hadn't known cloning was illegal, he would have sworn that they were all copies of the same shallow, empty-headed bitch. They were the same in every school.

He made it to his desk in homeroom, but he didn't even get to turn his computer on.

The teacher didn't even let them all get settled before she started reading off a handscreen. "The following students will report immediately to the Admin of Health."

Leander felt something collapse in the general vicinity of his throat. He just knew.

"Isaiah Lamkin...Dean Foreman...Leander Schaiden..."

He sighed. The rest of the little bastards were too busy snickering at him to hear it. They hated him. He was That Kid, the one who looked at Weird Stuff on his computer, drew in the margins of his notebooks, and was Probably Some Kind of Devil Worshiper.

That was all right. He hated them too.

I'd rather be weird than stupid.

He shouldered his bag, and slouched his way out into the corridor.

Sixteen kids sat in a room. Every other desk. Leander was told to put his bag under his seat, and he was given one of those answer sheets where you had to fill in the little bubbles with a pencil. The test they gave him was ten pages long, badly Xeroxed. Some teacher he had never seen before stood up in front of the class and put his hand on a disk copy of the Earth Standard Bible

"I swear that these tests will be absolutely without punitive consequences, no matter what your answers may be. So help me God."

Leander frowned. That was weird. So he could write fuck off and these bastards couldn't do anything about it? It had to be true. If you lied on a Bible you would be stoned to death. Or worse. And four cameras—one in each corner of the room—had just seen the teacher swear.

"These tests are for the purpose of research to improve public service in our schools. Please be completely honest and answer every question. There is no time limit."

I don't like this, he thought.

He flipped open the little packet, skimmed through the questions.

Do you ever take illegal drugs?

Do you masturbate?

Do you hate your mother or father?

Do you hate your teachers?

Do you believe in God?

All the questions were like that, yes or no answers, until the last four pages. There was only one question at the top of each page, with blank lines filling up the rest of the space. Essay questions. Great.

How do you feel about the Church?

What do you think will happen when you die?

If you could kill someone and get away with it, would you? How would you do it?

I don't like this at all, Leander thought, biting his lip.

He started coloring in yesses and nos.

When he was finished he handed the weird teacher his papers, and was given a pass back to class. He shuffled through the rest of his day in a daze. The only high point was in physical training. They were learning archery.

When he got home he didn't even have a chance to key open the door. His mother opened it for him, and stood there staring at him. Her eyes were red and swollen, as if she had been crying. "Leander, get in here."

"What happened?"

They were in the kitchen, and she turned away from him and covered her face. "Sit down."

Oh, god, they know, he thought. Visions of prison, or worse, a reconditioning hospital. Again. Being strapped to a bed screamed at, prayed over. The Tri-Six Terrorist, at the mercy of the state. He ran through a mental list of his crimes. Vandalism. Arson. Theft. Heresy. Hacking. Drugs.

How the fuck had they caught him?

His mother leaned over the table. Soren Schaiden looked more like Leander's sister than his mother. She had his green eyes, his straight espresso-colored hair--and his temper. He leaned back. Strategic retreat.

"Leander, did you take some kind of test today? In school?"

She didn't sound mad. Weird. "Yeah. Some kind of ethics kind of a thing. It was stupid," he said, carefully. "Why? Did they telecomm you? Did I fail it, or something?"

"No," she said her face very white, like her bones were showing through it. "No, Leander, you didn't fail."

After that, his mom and dad shut themselves in the living room and locked him out.

Leander paced, creeping as close to the door as he could. He caught snatches of conversation, his mother mostly.

"...just a child...you know how he is...there has to be a way to get them to let him..."

They did know. Fuck.

He went into his room and hacked the intercom into the living room.

"Paul, he probably said all those things as a joke. He's just like I was at his age, just mad at everything with something to prove. This can't happen. If we tell them he was in recon--"

"They already know that, Soren. That's probably why he got picked in the first place."

"But this is crazy!"

She was crying. And shouting. Leander was feeling strange, like he might sneeze or choke or something. Would she go to jail too, for what he had done? And the fucking SCHOOL, full of fucking LIARS, tomorrow he was going to shut them down for at least a month, they had sworn on camera on a Bible, if they could cheat, if they really could, cheat, it was

over.

"This can't be happening!" she was shouting at Paul. "Why the fuck do they let him do this? We have fucking ships, airplanes, surface-to-space missiles, all those goddamned satellites...and they're still letting

him do this? Why the fuck don't they just kill the bastard?"

Soren dissolved into sobbing.

Leander swallowed hard. He had never, ever heard her use the word fuck before. Never. Not even the time when he was six and he'd gashed open his forehead, and the car had run out of charge on the way to the hospital.

Missiles? Was she mad that they hadn't shot at him? What the hell was going on?

None of this made any damn sense.

He stood in the middle of his room, furious at himself. How had he screwed up so utterly? Where had he slipped up? How the fuck had they caught him? Had they caught him? Was this about the Tri-Six, or about that damn test, or both?

It didn't matter now. No matter which it was about, he'd been nailed for something. He was headed either for recon or prison.

No. Think. You can't just go crazy over this, there has to be an answer. If you lose it, you're done. Now think.

He was standing in the middle of his room, with his hands in his hair like someone in a bad play. He took a deep breath. Think.

It couldn't be the Tri-Six. He knew damn well what the state's reaction to terrorism was. They would have arrested him already, or shot him as soon as he was out in the open. It had to have something to do with that goddamned psychology test.

This test will be absolutely without punitive consequences.

"Bullshit," he muttered to himself. It had to be recon. In their fucked-up self-righteous delusions, they didn't consider that punishment. They considered it...health care.

He made a little scared sound, without meaning to. Not again. Recon. What little he could remember about the last time still gave him screaming nightmares. All he knew was that it had been a sterile, white wasteland, and it had begun to seem that he had always been there, that escape was impossible, because there was nowhere else.

He wouldn't go back. He wouldn't survive it.

He had so much to do, and space only knew how little time.

He started making a pile on his bed, of everything he had that he had to ditch. He was too frantic to do this intelligently, and he was making a big mess. It didn't matter. A small mountain of illegal disks, books, and tiny cellophane packets of weed began to form.

He kept out a few black-market disks of old-earth music, his game disks, and his journal. He stuffed those into his black vinyl backpack.

He wasn't preparing to run away. There was no point in even trying that. They had him. There was nowhere to run to.

He piled up everything on his Earth flag, tied up the corners to make a lumpy sack. He would burn that. Those were things that could conceivably be traced to others. He didn't want that. He only kept the things he knew only he could be blamed for.

He had to have a way to get rid of the stuff.

He called down to the living room. It beeped twice, and Paul finally answered it. "What is it, son?"

"Um...am I still going to school tomorrow?"

Paul sighed, deeply. The utterly horrible thing was that it sounded as though he had been crying, too. "Yes. Same time as always."

"Okay," Leander said, and he couldn't think of anything to follow that, so he clicked the comm off.

Good. He could ditch the bag on the way. He pushed his bag of evidence over, lay on his back and fumbled his headphones on. He scavenged two Valium from his backpack and dry-swallowed them.

He wasn't going to recon. That much, he knew.

He would run until they had him cornered, and force them to shoot him down. Maybe, if he got lucky, he could rig an explosion or something, take a few of the cops out with him. Even though there would be plenty more to take their places.

That's bullshit, Leander, said the little sarcastic night-voice that made him wonder if he was going crazy. You're no hero. You don't have the balls to do that.

Yeah? Getting shot is painless. The laser just punches you full of holes. You die. You're right, I have no balls whatsoever. I'm a coward. I can't face recon again. I don't know how I survived it the first time.

He waited for the voice. It didn't answer.

The drug slithered blue tendrils around his fear, unfolded his rage, and dragged him into a heavy, suffocating sleep.

precursor

Leander woke up afraid to open his eyes. For a minute, he was certain he was in recon already. That would have been just like the State, to take him while he was sleeping. He reached above his head, felt the shelves there, knocked a handscreen down onto his chest. Still his room. He got up, feeling disconnected and numb. This must be how people feel living in a war zone, he thought.

He went downstairs, expecting the police to jump out at him at any moment. It was only morning, another one showing him the same morning things he always watched. His father, Paul, drinking coffee. The uninteresting walls of his house.

It should at least have had the decency to be different. Innovative. After all, this might be his last morning on Earth.

Leander slunk into his chair, pulled it discreetly away from his father. He folded his arms, examined his fingernails. He never ate in the mornings. Usually, he just sat there waiting for the usual lecture.

His father was different today.

Paul was an engineer, doing some kind of job that vaguely had to do with designing the tunnels for the underground transit. Usually he pulled up the news reports, read to Leander from the screen, and added his own editorial on The Way The World Is These Days.

Today he sat, his large heavy frame oddly hunched, and stared at the newspaper on the screen, but his eyes didn't move, and he didn't click

the page-down button. He took tiny nervous sips of his coffee, and no editorial appeared to be forthcoming.

He knows. And he's so ashamed he won't even look at me.

He was mad, suddenly. They could at least tell him what the hell was going on. He wished he could unravel his father, possibly, to see if there were new colors underneath, some bright fascination lying wasted under his blank skin. If he knew that geography maybe he could read Paul's mind.

He imagined virgin reams of color, hidden by skin from all eyes for a lifetime, suddenly in his sight. To discover some secret. As if the universe had any secrets.

As if he really wanted to know what was going to happen.

"Leander," Paul said.

Captive, the boy sighed and waited. His brain was already writing the script. Be a man. Face up to what you've done. Or, worse, you weren't raised that way.

His father paused, seeming to search for words. Leander chewed one of his fingernails and wished he was still in bed.

"Is there school today?"

Leander wondered how he should know. Half the time even the school didn't know when the warning broadcasts had gone out. The levels of poison in the air rose and fell by the hour, and the boy never turned to the newscasts on the computer anymore, not even to check the updates. He had the alarm set to warn him if there were thunder or ion storms forecast, out of mortal terror of the damn things, but that was all. He felt that none of the rest of it had nothing to do with him.

He got enough propaganda in school.

"Yes," he said, to stop the conversation. "The count's not even in the yellow today. They won't close school unless there's an eighty percent chance of orange before noon."

He deliberately pulled an artificial face of adolescent annoyance at that, trying to break the mood, and his father made a halfhearted grin.

"When they give your workforce card, you'll miss being in school," Paul said, as he'd said a thousand times before.

"Yeah," Leander agreed automatically. Was he actually spending his last morning pacing through this tired old schtick? If he lived long enough to get a workforce card, he fully intended to hack the thing and spend his days in his own house, reading illegal books.

It was depressing, how removed from his reality his father actually was.

He wasn't in the mood for the debate. His usual argument was that you got paid for work, and his father's argument was that when you were in school, your parents paid for everything, and you didn't need money anyway.

Apparently Paul had never tried to get narcotics without credits.

Besides, they were going to nail him as soon as he got to school. He was dead. It was over. No more Tri-Six. No more feeling like some kind of underground comic-book hero.

Leander got up, eager in a distant way to leave. The sooner it was over, the sooner it was over. "See ya."

Paul waved, a lazy gesture that made the boy want to scream. "Have a good day."

Leander closed his eyes for a microsecond his father would not notice, and tried to imagine a good day. Maybe the sun would go supernova. "I will," he lied.

Paul nodded, as though this had affirmed some belief he carried in his worn useless brain. "Learn something," he added.

Leander smiled at that. It threatened to crack his face. "I always learn something," he said over his shoulder, leaving.

"Leander," his father called.

The boy stopped, gritting back a sigh, his hand on the doorknob. "Yes?"

"You come home right after school today. Your mother and I--" Paul

took off his eyeglasses, rubbed at the inner corners of his eyes. This was vaguely interesting, and Leander studied it for a moment. "There's somewhere we have to go, tonight."

"All right," he said. So that was when they would take him. So he had half a day to maybe...think of something?

He wouldn't even hope for that yet. He would wait, until he saw what they had planned. There was no way to run, anyway. He'd never even get out of the quadrant, let alone off the planet and past the Reach.

"I love you, son," Paul said.

That one was strange. And scary.

My god, they really are going to kill me today.

Leander paused, his hand on the door's keypad, and looked at his father a long time before he decided it wasn't worth the questions. He mumbled something, slamming the door behind him. The keypad beeped in protest, and he mashed at the buttons irritably until it shut the hell up.

Once he was outside, he took the little bundle of evidence out of his bookbag, and threw it into their neighbor's incinerator. So much for that.

lysergia

There were no guards. And all the gates were closed, today, even the one in the front of the compound.

The school was obviously closed for the day, if not the entire week. So the poison levels in the air were up again.

The mask was cloying suddenly, choking him with the ghost of the smell of rubber, faint and nauseating under the flat blank taste of filtered air. The temptation set in, familiar after years, to rip off his mask and breathe deep, sucking in the deadly air like a deprived addict. He wondered if it would be slow and painless, like freezing to death. Or would he convulse, screaming, vomiting up pale pink clots of lung tissue and tearing his hands to shreds on the cement? Without the wristunit they would never find him in time.

The patrols would stumble across him after dark, kicking at him with tipped boots, taking him for a junkie on the nod, before they turned their flashlights on and saw his body, blue as a drowned baby, the acid in the night dew already peeling his skin. The Tri-Six, a suicide on a street corner, and all of them deprived of their scapegoat.

Leander smiled. He had control over something, and the Council didn't even know it. It was a useless fact, though. He didn't want to die. He just wanted to live in a world that changed sometimes. Once, it had, before the Revolution. He wished he had been born then, to see the world before the fences went up.

He considered. Going home wasn't really even an option. He imagined hours filled with long silences between himself and his father, with his mother hurrying around, her voice transparently cheerful, asking millions of casual questions. The boy would sit and improvise the correct responses until the rage under his skin threatened to rend him into pieces, and he could make some excuse to escape to his room. He might spend hours there, too, playing silent games, burning incense to cover the forbidden smell of any number of drugs. What a boring way to spend what might be his last day of freedom.

He considered his resources. He had a stolen wrist unit that made read him as sixteen--he could buy any poisons he wanted to, from any shop in the district. He rarely used it anymore. He had tried everything, and nothing could play the trick anymore, the trick of convincing all your nerves that you were in paradise, that nothing mattered, that joy was possible in the flesh.

He missed that trick with an ache that kept him awake at night. Especially now. If he had to go out in a blaze of glory, couldn't it at least be while absolutely smashed?

There were always street drugs. It was the same shit, but not processed out of all risk, not rationed and tallied by computer to keep him from acquiring the amount he now needed to really touch this flesh. And there were still illegals--LSD, opium, peyote.

He had about six hundred on him, and twelve hundred more on an illegal access. It was enough. He knew where to go.

Leander took the transit, making sure to change buses several times in case his stolen passcode was detected. His mistake was when he

finally left the station in District Four. He accidentally used his own temp card to buy water from a street vendor, and when the man ran his number through the computer the message flag promptly flashed onto the screen.

"Message for you," he told the boy, his voice muffled behind the glass window. "Says you can pick up the new wrist unit anywhere in D-12."

Fuck. He knew Leander lived in Twelve, now, and that he had no legitimate reason to even be in Four. Except drugs. And maybe it was a trap; maybe they knew he was half-heartedly trying to think of a way to escape this. "Thanks," the boy said, grabbing the bottle, already turning.

"Hey, wait a minute--"

Leander meant to run, but the flash he got was so vivid it nearly dropped him to his knees. He could feel himself driving his fists through the little glass window. He saw the man in his hands, gaping like a fish dragged out of an aquarium, his neck breaking with the same wet popping sound chicken bones made when you twisted them.

Fuck being the Tri-Six. Fuck his impending execution. Fuck recon. He was sick and goddamned tired of being chased, bossed around, controlled.

Leander turned back so quickly the man drew away from him, startled. "Yes?" he snapped.

I could kill him. I'm already dead. And, I think, yes, I think it would feel...so...good, so.....right

He snapped himself out of that thought. He'd even managed to scare himself.

The old man stared at the boy for a long moment, then lowered his eyes, suddenly, as if he had come to some decision. "Nothing," he muttered.

Leander didn't look back to see what keys the man hit. He left his bottle on the counter, fuck it. He had his fists clenched so hard his nails bit into his palms. He didn't even realize it until minutes later, when his hands began to cramp.

The streets were mostly deserted because of the poison levels, and Leander stopped on the corner. He felt as if he might scream if he didn't. The sunlight was cutting through the haze, slamming from the concrete back up into his eyes, and the rhythm of his footsteps was jarring his teeth together. His breath was wheezing in and out of his mask. It tasted of rubber. He fought the urge to rip it off, tried to breathe slowly and deeply until the sickness passed. He was doubled over, gasping and shaking. If anyone had seen him they would have sent for an ambulance before he could protest.

In his private thoughts he called it the fury, and it hit him more and more often lately. Someone would do or say something that pushed an invisible switch in his head, and the visions would come.

He had never told anyone. The last thing he needed was to be hospitalized, drugged and reprogrammed. He had had quite enough of that already.

Like they're going to do, very soon...

They tried to put a positive face on it, with all the computer ads about finding help and not being alone. One prison in particular had been sending him electronic mail ever since his Jesus sketches. St. Catherine's School and Hospital for Troubled Youth. We care about you!!! Healing minds and saving souls for the LORD!!!

Somehow he doubted that their particular brand of care was particularly tender, or loving, for that matter. He knew that the truth behind the pretty for-Jesus facade was that you would be locked up until the rebellion was beaten out of you, no matter which saint, no matter how musical the slogan.

He wouldn't consider that as an option. That would have been admitting that the problem was his, and Leander was certain it wasn't. Even worse, that would've been admitting that they were right--and Leander knew they weren't.

A long time ago, something had gone very wrong with this world, and it was poisoning him, slowly.

He could feel something in him, something...growing.

He wouldn't surrender it. Even if it hurt, and it often did. It was his.

synthesis

Leander sat there, for minutes or hours, gasping. He did not know what he would do next, and that was uncomfortable for him. He always had a plan of some kind.

No school. And the count would keep the streets fairly empty, except for the copbots and the cameras. It would be pretty safe to do a little exploring.

Should he risk a search for a new drug--opium, maybe--or should he return home, to safety and infinite boredom?

It might be his last chance to make a decision, any kind of independent decision.

It wasn't much of a choice.

There was a risk, either way. If he went home it would be obvious he was running; therefore obvious he'd been planning something illegal. If he stayed...

The ugly shriveled man in the little street stand had backed off. There was nobody else in sight. And Leander was still hungry. He was still itching for the trick.

LSD.

An evil familiar voice whispered the letters into the base of his skull, and it made a bright hot rush explode along his spine.

All his reservations shrieked a violent NO. They were immediately drowned out by the mental equivalent of a wicked grin. His father had always called that the devil in him.

He had read all the pathetic, censored, judgmental information his computer would give him on acid, under the guise of a report for his ethics (read: hypocrisy) class. The report had mysteriously never been completed. From there, he had gone to the underground information dealers, trading nonexistent electronic credits and out-of-date passcodes, or breaking into thousands of anonymous postings with rigged sequences for actual objective data on lysergic acid.

Revelations.

He wanted one so badly he could feel it in his bones.

It was his last day. Didn't he get one wish, at least?

"It isn't fair," he whispered to himself. He looked up, at the yellow haze drifting across the sun. The sun pierced a rainbow in the eyepiece of his mask, and he covered the lenses with his hands. The whole world was a jigsaw puzzle, with all the little tabs trimmed off until it was all squares. It fit, but the picture didn't make any sense anymore.

He figured he was one of the few people with the tabs still there that had managed to escape asylum or prison. So far. Even if they hadn't caught him, even if this was a glorified parent-teacher conference...if he kept having...attacks...in the middle of the street, he wouldn't be free for long. They probably had tapes of him already. It was only a matter of time before he snapped. He knew that. He could feel the tension inside him, rupturing soft delicate things. The question was not if, but when.

An angry recklessness settled over him. He suddenly didn't care. About anything. The sensation was a terrible deep relief. His mind worked again. This was a new kind of fury, and he welcomed it, embraced it. They would eventually lock him up anyway. It didn't matter if it was today, two months, two years from now...he already knew he was deviant beyond all chance of redemption. He might as well make the most of his uncertain time outside the prison hospitals. After all, that time might only be hours.

"Bang. Smash," he whispered to himself.

Radio...live transmission.

He vaguely remembered his father telling him about some secret and probably insipid thing he had to be home in time for. No matter. He would plead sickness, or not go home at all. There was nothing for him there, anyway. Everything that mattered to him was hidden, in his backpack or in his brain. Later could just fucking take care of itself.

Fucking planet. It was making him crazy.

He stood up, mentally doing calculations of distance, danger, and

available credits. He began to walk, the direction certain. He did not hesitate.

If he only had a few more hours to live, he was damn well going to live them right.

freakshow

sa·dism (sâ¹dîz'em, sàd'îz'-) *noun*

1. Psychology. a. The act or an instance of deriving sexual gratification from infliction of pain on others. b. A psychological disorder in which sexual gratification is derived from infliction of pain on others.

2. Delight in cruelty.

3. Extreme cruelty.

[After Comte Donatien Alphonse Fran Sadeçois de.]

— sa¹dist *noun*

— sa·dis¹tic (se·dis¹tîk) *adjective*

— sa·dis¹ti·cal·ly *adverb*

Oberon was bored out of his mind.

He was sitting in his office on Goya. It was one of a fleet of three flagships he used on these missions of acquisitions, the newest and the largest. It was a masterpiece of leather and chrome and recessed lighting and various amusements, and he was sick of all of it.

He had already re-arranged the furniture, and sent random obscene files back to his Sphere. Now, he was sitting in his elaborate chair, staring out of the wide floor-to-ceiling window at Earth, spread out below him like a virtual map. He was in one of his brief and intense depressions, and he had rejected all offers of drugs, food, and entertainment. He wanted to sit and stare out the window, and wait for something to happen. The problem with immortality was that you might wait for a very long time.

The door chimed softly, and he looked up, irritated. He keyed the camera controls in the arm of his chair. A viewscreen on his desk slid silently up, turned itself so that he could see it. It was Victoria, with an antigrav crate. He considered, and keyed the door open.

She walked in, moving in that strange, almost aimless style she had. The crate drifted in front of her, guided by the pressure of her fingertips. "A present," she said, smiling behind the wires lacing her lips together. It had taken her years to learn to speak again. Her voice was muffled, but understandable.

He didn't get up, and he was careful not to look curious. "I don't need anything, Victoria, and I told you that you could come with me only if you left me alone," he told her, coldly.

She shrugged. "It's something you don't have one of."

"Now that, I would really like to see. Open it," he said.

She keyed something into the antigrav controls, and the top of the box unfolded like a Chinese puzzle.

He watched this, not really interested yet. He picked up a box from his desk, opened it, and started eating mushrooms. They were imported, genetically engineered, grown underground in a computer-controlled environment. They tasted awful. He liked them because they were expensive, mildly hallucinogenic, and difficult to obtain.

Victoria lifted out a panel that he recognized. A life support card. He felt himself beginning to smile. "Will I like this?"

She looked at him, without answering, and lifted out a limp package that looked suspiciously human.

She cleared a space on his desk, without asking him. He rescued his box of mushrooms and leaned back in his chair to give her room. She laid the bundle down and unwrapped it. He was actually interested, now.

When he saw what she had brought him he stood up, stepped away from his desk, horrified. "What is it?"

"A child," she said.

He leaned closer, set his mushrooms down. It was a naked boy, but he was colorless, like a deep-sea fish, with white skin, white hair, strangely elongated limbs. Victoria smiled, reached out and stroked the bonecolor hair. Her fingernails were long, painted deep green. "Do you like him?"

"What is wrong with him?" Oberon asked her, revolted and fascinated.

"It's called albinism. The engineering has cut down on it so much that he's one of seven left in the system. Look," she said, and turned the boy's head, pried open one snowy eyelid. The iris of his eye was the color of a tourmaline, a deep strange shade of rose. "I know how you like eyes," she added, her mouth turned tight and mischievous.

“Incredible.” Oberon picked up one limp hand, examined the fingers, stroked the inner wrist. The boy’s skin was soft, slightly damp, seeming almost transparent. He dropped the child’s hand back onto his chest, already reaching for the top drawer of his desk. “I wonder,” he murmured, his fingers searching for a smooth leather case.

Victoria smiled again. “What do you wonder, Lord Septarch?”

Oberon snapped open the case, and pulled out a straight-razor. “I wonder what color he is on the inside.”

on the inside

Leander had expected a syringe, something more violent and invasive and inherently sexual than the two tiny pieces of paper wrapped in foil he was given. He questioned this, and was told that they could be applied to any mucous membrane, usually the tongue, but they were equally effective when the more adventurous put them in the eye. Windowpaning, they called it. For the twisted, anal insertion was possible, and was the easiest method to conceal from nosy parents and curious moral police.

He pulled his mask off for an instant, holding his breath, and tucked one of the papers between his cheek and gum, and used a public restroom to push the other one up his ass, more out of obstinate perversion than any practical considerations.

The sensation was odd, not exactly painful, but itchy, like wiggling a loose tooth. He still felt the penetration of his fingers, scratchy and hot and somehow frantic, all the way to the transit station.

Had he put it in too deep?

Jesus, could anyone tell?

He toyed with the idea of taking it out again, but the paper was only about half the size of his fingernail, and the prospect of trying to find it and remove it was unnerving. Besides, he couldn't really put it in his mouth or his eye after that, could he?

He tried to walk normally, waiting in anticipation and dread for some sign of the drug's effect. He felt nervous, shaky, and paranoid, all of which was more or less the way he usually felt. The paper in his mouth felt like the remnant of a spitball. He sucked it to the front of his mouth, chewed it for a moment, and tucked it back inside his cheek with the tip of his tongue. He seemed to taste a faint electric/metallic flavor, like the taste of a key if you chewed on it, but he might have been imagining that. Maybe it took more time, more patience. Or maybe he'd just been cheated.

He stood apart from the group waiting for the tran. He tried to look inconspicuous. He glanced up at the sky, and he thought he saw something, a faint metallic gleam. Probably a satellite, or a ship, with cameras pointed straight at him.

He took a seat near the door of the transit, in case he had to escape, and waited.

He didn't wait for long.

At first, there was only trembling, locking every muscle tight and furious, as if he was expecting a fight or a beating. He tried to ignore it, even though it was so obvious the man sitting next to him eyed him suspiciously. Or did he? Leander wasn't sure.

It was nerves. Only nerves. He told himself that even though he knew it was a big fat lie.

The vicious energy settled in his mouth, closed so hard around his teeth that they grew. He could feel them forcing themselves out, long and lean. He was certain that if it continued his jaw would be sealed shut, and after much resistance he reached up furtively and felt his teeth with one hesitant experimental finger. He half-expected then to snap closed by themselves, taking most of his fingertip off.

His teeth didn't feel any longer or sharper, but his mouth told another story entirely. His teeth were growing, long and strong enough to bite through concrete, and starving, hunger streaming down from lips to throat to stomach.

More. He wanted more.

He looked at his hands. He could see the blood under his skin. It looked like meat. He stared until he realized he had his arm about an inch away from his eyes, and the person next to him really was watching him now, curious and revolted. He glanced at the man, and could see right through his skin, to the flesh below, red and gaping. Saliva gushed into his mouth, nearly choking him.

He had taken off his mask at some unknown point, and he wanted desperately to put it on again, but no one wore them on the transit, and he wasn't sure he remembered how to open his backpack.

Last day...go ahead and bite them...last day...

He sat on his hands and tried to stare at nothing in particular. He was sure his eyes held his secret, easily readable to everyone around.

He was sitting on a train full of meat. He could smell them. And his

teeth, merciless, were still growing.

fascination

The doorknob was a riddle, one he struggled to solve until his father opened it for him. "Leander. You're home early," he said, already turning back to his chair.

Leander fought to decipher this, then said, "They only had school this morning. The count went up and they made us go home, but the tran was packed."

He stumbled towards the stairs, marveling at the genius of his brain. How clever of it, to construct such plausible lies, without his conscious input! He felt a rush of love for his brain, so intense he longed to unhinge it from the unfair cage of his skull, lavish it with kisses and admiration and praise.

That was so strange he stopped in the middle of the staircase, running it through his mind again. He had the urge to return to the bottom of the stairs and walk up again, as though his location was connected with his thoughts. His brain was in his hands, wet salty tissue open to his lips, his tongue, his teeth.

Teeth. He wondered if it would be soft, like the best meat, or rough and textured, like celery, cartilage. If he ate his brain, would he draw in through his blood all that he already knew? With no brain, where would the data go?

"Leander," his father was saying.

"I know, we have to go out," his miraculous brain said. God, he was hungry. "I just want to take a nap first. It's the count...I'm really tired."

"I'll call you when we need to leave," his father said.

Leander could hear his mother, just as he made it up the stairs and closed the door to his room behind him. His father was making talking sounds, which meant his mother wouldn't come up there, would let him sleep.

He collapsed on his bed. The texture of the bedclothes ripped through his nerves, and he moaned, almost undone. His fingers. Inside. He could feel them still.

LSD. He imagined the little tab of paper, up in his guts, and he thought he could feel it there, electric, dissolving.

He didn't know if his eyes were closed or open, but he let the revelations come. New. That was all he wanted, new.

He could unravel things, now. Anything that occurred to him did so in strange new shapes, and he saw connections that he had never perceived. He watched, fascinated.

He had wanted more. This was more, so much more.

He could reach out and feel the solar system spinning around him. He was sure that if he tried he could make it spin faster, or slower, or even stop entirely.

The strange agonized angel he'd painted over his bed folded and unfolded its wings, opened a mouth studded with sharp green teeth, sprouted new eyes in myriad colors, gestured him closer with languid fingers.

Open, closed. He tried to close his eyes, and it came in waves, rattling his new teeth, and he let it come. He wished he'd put both of the little papers up his ass. That was more appropriate. Penetration. Chemical rape.

He lay on his bed, eyes hopefully closed, and waited for the revelation.

The room expanded, spinning lazily. He spread his arms wide, feeling the breeze ruffling his hair. There was a sensation of falling, and suddenly Leander was not alone.

He thought, oh, if only I could draw all this.

The man. The dark man, sable majesty.

"Oh, it's you," Leander whispered, tears pricking at his eyes.

Yes. And a voice said, the torch.

Leander thought it might be God and he held out his hands, and said, "More..."

And God laughed, and cobwebs covered Leander, like rain, except they didn't burn his skin. He was in a cocoon, and he couldn't move, and his bones were changing.

kinetic energy

Oberon was behind his desk, currently drifting over the Middle East. He was toying with a very expensive glass of very expensive wine.

He tossed it over his shoulder to hear it shatter.

He was angry, that slow subtle creeping anger that made him hate everything, everyone.

The girl in his room was new, a mess of nerves and apologies, and he spun lazily in the leather chair to watch her frantically picking up glass. She had been trying without success to get the blood out of the carpet. Mostly she was just spreading the stain around, making an even bigger mess. He didn't mind. He knew damn well the carpet would need to be replaced. He had just sent for her to watch her try and clean it. It was a game, more or less, to see what her reaction would be to see half of his elegant office splattered like an abattoir.

She wasn't pretty. Her round pale face was a mess of overcorrected DNA. Common blood. He sighed.

Sometimes the search was an uneasy adventure. Sometimes he would tingle in the back of his throat, the palms of his hands, being led like royalty through an endless parade of church basements and hastily emptied town halls. The air was always thick with the scent of terror, and children would be arranged for him, lined up in rows like carefully displayed jewelry in a shop window.

Sometimes he adored it. Sometimes he would choose one, lead him or her far enough away to send the little brat's parents into paroxysms of hysteria before he would pretend to change his mind, and let the squalling little abomination go running back again.

Other times, it was a completely draining waste of time and energy, a stunningly boring galactic joyride that accomplished almost nothing.

Like this time, for instance.

God, he hated Earth. The only thing in its favor was that the level of repression inherent in a planetary theocracy produced children with interesting psychological hang-ups. That, and the entertainment of the horrified looks he got on the rare occasions when he ventured out in

public. Once a woman had brandished a crucifix in his face. He'd taken it from her, held it over her head, his face expressionless, until her struggles to reach it became dull and he'd dropped it in the dust and walked past her.

His eyes drifted to the paper on his desk. He had no problem with computers, but in the interest of complicating the lives of his servants he often insisted that everything had to be hand-written, on the finest paper, in crimson ink. Without mistakes. He picked up his schedule. One more. One more selection before he could return to the Sphere, away from all this noise, dirt, religion.

He had only four. Four. Three of which were so dull he had decided they were expendable. Not one of them intrigued him. It was the first time in years he'd had to travel this far before he'd found nine or ten or so, and he'd spent two weeks finding this miserable four.

There were only seventeen to choose from in this last group, and the youngest was twelve. Twelve. He sighed. It was possible there were children being hidden from him. Or else someone was paying off his examiners to fail their children in the tests.

He would have to look into it.

The idea pleased him. Sometimes he was too good at his work, too good at commanding perfect obedience. He would have to make some changes, invent new rules.

He missed having trials, interrogations, executions. He missed planning the perfect tortures, dressing in the perfect regalia. Watching their faces. Listening to their silly rationalizations, before the frantic incoherence began.

The girl made a small cry. He looked up to see her cradling a gashed and bleeding thumb.

His expression did not change.

He looked back at his paperwork, gestured for her to fill and bring him a new glass. She did, crying quietly. There was a scarlet thumbprint on it.

He held it out to her, wordlessly, one eyebrow raised a fraction of an inch. She wiped the smear off with the hem of her skirt, and handed

the glass back to him; careful not to let her fingers touch his.

He laughed, deliberately, to see if she would cringe. She did. Priceless. “What is your name?”

“Aloris,” she said, her voice pale, thin.

“Aloris,” he said, making it obscene. “I want you to go over there and lick that carpet.”

She looked up at him, eyes stunned wide in disbelief? “What?”

“Lick. The carpet. As in put your tongue against it. Go on,” he said, amused.

She backed up, looking at him, waiting for reprieve. He brought his new glass of wine to his mouth. He was trying not to laugh again.

She moved back to the crimson splatter, eyes dancing from him, to the blood, back to him. She knelt, finally, awkward, and pushed back her hair, leaned over, crying. He could see the muscles in her neck convulse. Gagging. Oh, beautiful. She put out her tongue, tears bright on her eyelashes. Blood and bleach.

He decided to let her live.

sympathy

“Leander?”

The knock came again. Leander groaned and wrapped his arms around his head, the sound still rattling around in his skull.

“I’m sick,” he said. “Go away.”

His mother’s voice came again, worried and infuriating. “Leander, you have to get up. We can’t be late.”

“I can’t go. I’m sick.”

She overrode his privacy lock and opened the door a crack. The wedge of light from the hallway slammed into his cranium.

“Leander, we have to go. Even if you’re sick.”

She flicked on his overhead light, wringing another moan from him. She was leaning over him then, her hands cool and invasive. “Are you all right?” She tugged his arms away from his face, got a look at his eyes. “What did you take?”

He hated her then, ruining his dreams, and he snapped, “Acid,” to spite her, to see her face crumple.

“Soren, what is it?” came his father’s voice, irritated and tense.

His mother looked at him for a long time before she answered Paul. “Leander’s not feeling well. I’m going to help him get ready. Go downstairs and get that old damn electrocar running, will you?”

She said more softly to Leander, “I was known to frequent the opium dens when I was a little older than you. Who could blame us, the world being what it is?”

He stared at her, caught someplace between delighted and appalled. “Does Dad know that?” he asked, his tongue stumbling.

“Paul?” She laughed. “No. At least, he pretends he doesn’t, and I’d like if very much if it stayed that way.”

She laid her hand on his forehead, still cool, but comforting now, no

longer invasive. He loved her just as suddenly as he'd hated her, and he turned his face and pressed a grateful kiss to her palm. She smelled like lavender perfume. She was like him. Yes. How he wished he had known that, before, sooner.

Soren nodded, stroked his hair. "Can you stand?"

He did, even though it sent pain through his back, his thighs. His mother was small, scarcely bigger than he was, but she kept him upright all the way to the bathroom.

Once there, she undressed him, pushing away his protesting hands.

"I'm too old for this," he said.

She put her hands on her hips, glared at him, her mouth sad. "You're right. So am I," she told him.

She persuaded him into the tub, washed him, even his hair. He lay limp and moveless, neither helping nor hindering her. The smell of the soap was a new input, giving his brain pictures of roses and rain to wander through, curious and without fear.

She got him out of the tub again, dried and dressed him in his best civilian clothes, the blue ones, and brushed his hair. He ignored her, lost in texture, in circles of descending thought. "Thank you," he said, almost as an afterthought.

She didn't answer, but she smoothed his hair one more time, even though it didn't need it.

She half-carried him down the stairs and arranged him in the electrocar. He slumped, eyes closed. Soren pushed his bag in his hands, and he took it without question.

"We could run. I've got enough charge to take us far away from the city," Paul said to Soren, quietly.

"They'll find us. There's no explaining that away. It's not worth the risk, Paul.

"He's my boy. Our only child. We'll never have another."

"He's too old, anyway. He'll never be chosen at his age."

“Too old for what?” Leander said, curious now. He was too young for just about everything he wanted to do. What could he possibly be too old for?

“Nothing, Leander. Don’t worry about it,” his mother told him, her voice tight and uneven.

The motion of the engine soothed him. He could feel his mother beside him, in the back seat. That was strange, for her to sit beside him and not his father. She had her arm around him. That was nice. He snuggled closer to her, buried his face in her long hair. His mind was too busy with the colors to wonder. He fell, and did not resist.

Leander embraced the familiar weight of his bag, leaned against his mother, and dreamed.

abuse of power

His father drove for what seemed like hours. Leander finally heard the engines power down, and he sat up. "Where are we?"

"Ignatius Elementary Training Center," Soren told him.

"A school for little kids? Why?"

"It's a state-required exam, for all children under sixteen," his father said before Soren could answer.

"They did that at our school last year," Leander said, annoyed. "And I just took a test. Yesterday."

"There've been two cases of Plague 14. They're just being careful," his mother said quickly.

Leander grew quiet. He had to watch the news digicasts every day in school, and he hadn't heard about any Plague 14 cases since 2145. "I guess so," he mumbled.

Probably some kind of checkup because he'd been in priority counseling. Except...wasn't something...supposed to be happening...to him?

He closed his eyes, tried to keep the busy pictures from swarming in on him.

It was too much work.

He wanted to lie down and never move again, but at the same time, he wanted to scream as loud as he could, run as fast as he could, get into a fight.

The change was sudden, with no scene-change, like in a movie.

Except that he had no script.

Two policemen were coming up to the car.

They were stopping, fucking stopping, and two policemen were coming up to the car, and wasn't he supposed to be extra paranoid, for

some forgotten reason?

Leander sucked in his breath.

One of them gestured for his father to roll down the window.

He cringed, tried to brace himself for the imagined torture of laser fire.

“We’ll take the child. You can park over to the left, and someone will show you where you can wait.”

Fascist voices. No mercy. Just following orders

Leander’s hands closed hard on his backpack. I’m not a fucking child, he thought.

One of them was already opening the door on his side. “This way, son,” he said, not looking Leander in the face. He had on a helmet with a dark blue UV shield, even though it was early evening. He was wearing formal blues, with pins and braid and the elaborate cross on the right breast pocket. Leander stared at that. The threads were crawling in and out of the cloth like worms.

Underneath there was the unmistakable stiff bulge of an antilaser shield vest.

Riot gear? For a state-required exam in an elementary school?

Leander stood up, shakily, holding tight to his bag. “My mask—“

“The count went to green about two hours ago. You’ll be all right,” the policeman said, in a fake-friendly voice, familiar from a thousand social-consciousness assemblies.

Leander slung his bag over his shoulder, stuck his hands in his pockets. He gritted his teeth and tried to will the ground to stop billowing.

The policeman who had opened his door put his hand on Leander’s neck, steering him towards the school building, just the way they’d pushed him around in Priority. He thought about grabbing the man’s ring finger and twisting it as hard as he could—squishsnap—and then he tried to walk without thinking at all.

At the double doors two policemen patted him down. He held his breath, waiting for them to search his bag, but they put it on a little scanning table and gave it back to him without a word. His escort pushed him inside, walking so fast Leander had to nearly run.

It was like a dream. A dream he wasn't really having. A nightmare, he would wake up from, any minute now.

Inside there was a long hallway, lined by heavy doors. The nightmare-field tried to make his steps appear infinite, but he sang to himself: radio, live transmission, and the song moved forwards, and he knew this was no nightmare.

He wished he hadn't been smart enough to sing.

A boy sat on a folding chair, staring off into space, his hand tight around a bandage in the crook of his elbow.

Someone was crying, the sound snotty and muffled, a little kid trying to be quiet and failing.

Three more policemen were drinking coffee and talking in serious tones. They fell silent as Leander was guided past them.

He was put in a room with two chairs and a portable examining table. "Strip down. The doctor will be here in just a minute," the policeman told him.

Cold. There should have been no humanity in that voice. It should have been the mechanical, metallic voice of a security droid. Except it wasn't. A real live human had told him to do that.

That was the scary part.

The door slammed.

It clicked.

He was locked in.

Leander stood there, shocked and furious.

After a moment he set his bag in one of the chairs and fumbled out of

his clothes. He set them on top of his bag in a little heap. Naked, he sat on the very edge of the examining table and tried not to look scared.

His mind found the anonymous record of an unknown movie. Name, rank, and serial number, he thought, and tried to look brave.

After about twenty minutes the door opened. A man with gray hair and thick glasses in a white lab coat came in, tailed by yet another policeman. He had an electronic notepad, and started firing questions even before the door closed.

“Name?”

The boy swallowed. “Leander Schaiden.”

“Parents?”

Yes, I have two of them, thanks. “Paul and Soren Schaiden.”

“Are you natural or engineered?”

“I’m....I’m normal. Natural.” Leander was scrubbing his hands on his bare thighs. He had decided he really, really didn’t like this guy.

“Age?”

“Fourteen.”

“Have you engaged in sexual relations with anyone of either sex?”

His jaw dropped. Literally. “What the hell does that have to do with anything?”

“Have you engaged in—“

“No, all right? No.” he snapped, his voice shaking. He could feel himself blushing. He wasn’t sure if it was humiliation or anger.

The doctor toggled the voice recorder on his notepad. “Male subject, circumcised. Five-four, approximately one-fifteen pounds. Perfect skin. Perfect teeth. Hair dark brown, eyes green. Very delicate bone structure. Features more or less attractive, somewhat feminine. No

visible signs of disease, although he appears to be somewhat underweight."

He stepped over to Leander, pried open the boy's mouth and ran his finger along his teeth. Leander gagged, and pulled away, glaring. The policeman stepped closer, warning Leander with his eyes, his hand drifting towards the stun gun at his belt.

Oh, I get it. It takes two motherfuckers, one with a stunner, to keep control of one fourteen-year-old kid. Either you fucks know I'm the Tri-Six or you're scared of your own goddamned shadows. Or you're just sadistic evil bastards.

The doctor pushed on his stomach, scanned him for heart rate and breathing, peered into his eyes. He put on rubber gloves, examined Leander's penis with rough heartless fingers. "Stand up and lean over the table."

Leander was so mad he was shaking, really visibly shaking. He was wound up so tight he felt like he might just snap. "Fuck off," he snarled, making a grab for his bag and preparing to shove his way out the door, naked or not.

The policeman was a blur moving behind him. The jolt was so fast Leander didn't realize at first that the cop had stunned him. All he knew was that his tailbone hit the corner of the table, sending a stunning dull pain up into his spine. He tried to stand up, his hands curling into fists, and the room went gray and heavy.

Then he was bent over, the edge of the metal table digging into his ribs. His arms were pinned behind him, cruel hard fingers grating the bones in his wrists together, and hands were spreading his buttocks. He twisted violently, screaming profanity, his mouth bruised and muffled against the table, his teeth scraping the steel.

Fucker. Fucker. I'll kill you, I'll...

And he meant that. That was the scary part, not the heartless questions, not the impending violation. His own fierce reaction. His own bloodlust.

He kicked backwards, hard, felt his heel sink into something soft, heard one of them grunt and wheeze. "Little shithead," one of them gasped out, and a fist struck his back, driving his breath out.

The jolt came again, and the world caught fire, and there was nothing.
floodland

When his vision cleared he was lying on his side on the table. The doctor and his enforcer were gone. The cramp low in his stomach told him the rectal exam had been done while he was unconscious. He wondered if they'd found the little tab of acid. It felt like they'd been trying to find his goddamned lungs.

He sat up, slowly. The pain knotted, expanded into a bright flare. He bit back a groan, and stood, clumsily. He tried the doorknob, walking with one hand pressed to his stomach.

They'd locked him in again.

He put on his clothes. It was a useless display, an allowance to dignity he was no longer sure he possessed. His fingers were numb, and a horrible taste was running into his throat from his sinuses. He picked up his bag, buried his face in it to smell something familiar. His face left a colorless smear on the vinyl.

He put his hands to his cheeks, and discovered he was crying. The door opened again, and the same policeman who had brought him inside said, "You can come and wait out here."

He stepped into the hallway. His shoulderblade was a dull ache. He remembered being punched in the ribs, not his shoulder. Probably they'd done that while he was unconscious.

The policeman noticed he was crying and made a fake throat-clearing noise, and stared up at the ceiling.

There were other kids lined up along the wall. Leander went and stood with them. The kid beside him, a boy with bright red hair whispered, "They stun you?"

"Yeah," Leander muttered, scrubbing at his face, not looking at him. Something slippery and thick and cold was greasing the flesh of his ass, spreading damp in his blue dress-civilian pants.

Saline jelly?

God help him, blood?

He shifted his weight from one foot to the other. The wetness began to sting, making his eyes water. He folded his arms, defiantly.

"Me too. This doctor started touching my dick, and I yelled. I've got asthma and I told them that, but they stunned me anyway."

"Bastards," Leander said, more loudly than he'd meant to. One of the cops looked at him. Leander returned his stare, coldly, wishing with all his soul that looks could kill. The man abruptly looked away, glancing at his wristunit.

The red-haired kid was eyeing him. "You're too pretty. You'll probably be one of the ones to go."

Leander looked at him then. "Go where?"

The kid gaped at him as though he'd said something crazy. "You don't know?"

"How in hell would I know?" Leander demanded.

"Everybody knows about the tithe. We're candidates to be tithed out to Oberon," the kid said, the last word a whisper.

"Oberon?" This, too, was too loud, and earned him several terrified glares and some shushing from the other kids.

He'd heard that name before. A woman who lived across the street from him, screaming at her daughter, Stop that crying, or Oberon will come and get you.

Oberon. The Septarch. Emperor of All Things Unseen.

Jesus Christ, what a stupid game. They were all headed for recon. What kind of bullshit was that, feeding them that Halloween tale?

"That's a kid's story," Leander said scornfully. "Like a fairy tale. He'd have to be about four hundred years old."

"He's immortal. He hasn't come out as far as here in sixty years. This year he came in all the way to New Jerusalem, and he only chose

four. He has to have seven. Anybody who defies him, he kills. If the city doesn't give him what he wants, he levels it. That's what happened to the colony on Zion 4."

"That's bullshit," Leander told him. "That was a meteor."

The red-haired kid shrugged. "Whatever. I tell you, though, I'm glad I've got all this red hair and these ugly freckles. No way he'll pick me."

Leander put his hands to his face again. Features more or less attractive, somewhat feminine.

He adjusted the strap of his backpack over his shoulder. His stomach still hurt, the pain dull and thick like he'd been kicked. He concentrated on trying not to look somewhat feminine, and waited. He wasn't scared. Not at all. All that trembling was from the acid. Maybe this whole thing was from the acid. That was it. He was still lying in his room. It was a dream. He'd never expected one to be so vivid, so horribly...logical. Plausible.

If it was a dream...the problem was, what the hell was dreaming this kind of this shit supposed to mean, anyway?

One of the cops was talking into a portacomm. He gestured at another cop, and he turned and yelled to the waiting children, "Everybody move out!"

Leander did. He was used to this. He stumbled along like a zombie, one hand on the strap of his bag, the other pressed hard against his stomach.

They walked in line out a back door, across a courtyard, and into a gymnasium. There were grownups there, sitting in folding chairs lined up along one wall. Leander saw his parents, and he ran to them, buried his face in his mother's shoulder before he knew what he was doing. She hugged him, saying his name over and over. "Leander. I'm here. I'm here."

He could smell her skin, that soft perfume of milk-violets-dust-cookies that only she had, and he could feel the angles of her bones. Leander felt his father's hand on his shoulder, patting awkwardly.

Jesus, this is real. It's real. It's too vivid, even for acid. I'm really here.

He raised his head to look into his mother's eyes. "They hurt me," he managed. It was not at all what he meant.

Her eyes were bright, liquid. She hugged him again, hard and quickly, and pressed a fast kiss to his cheek near his ear. "It's almost over. We're going home in just a minute. Here, sit down."

She doesn't believe that.

There were no more chairs. Leander sat cross-legged on the floor at his mother's feet, his bag cradled in his lap. Soren handed him a tissue, and he blew his nose, sniffled, and tried to look okay. A few other kids his age were crying too, and not just girls. At least he wasn't the only one making a fool of himself.

"Why in just a minute?"

"They'll tell us when we can go," Soren said, not looking at him.

Leander knew, then. "It is, isn't it? It's Oberon."

Her face twisted, and he thought for a minute she might hit him.

"Leander, hush," his father said.

It wasn't the anger in his voice that made Leander hush.

It was the fear.

Oberon.

He lived on a mountain. In the desert. Under the ocean. In a space station built by evil aliens from Alpha Centauri. He was an alien. He was a robot. A giant. The devil. That old book, Dracula, forbidden for centuries, was about him.

He ate children. He had a horde of demons. He was a sorcerer. He was immortal. He was evil, and he could do anything.

He was a fairy tale.

Some invisible signal passed through the room, and there was silence. Leander pressed his back tight against his mother's knees. Eyes dropped. Except for his.

Leander raised his head, looking at the door. He sniffed at the air, as if he could catch the scent of immortality.

happily ever after

The guards came in first, two of them, dressed in violet laser plate armor, chrome belts crossing their chests from shoulder to waist. They had strange weapons at their belts. Crossbows, Leander realized. Not electronic, or lasers--real crossbows with actual bolts of physical steel.

Oh, cool, he thought dimly.

They were flanking the Septarch.

The Septarch moved like a liquid dream, walking slowly, his head high, his eyes arrogant and bored. He owned the room and everything in it, and he knew it.

Oh, God, I know him. Tears pricked at Leander's eyes, and something bright and liquid and fierce ignited in his stomach and scorched, up his throat, and settled, burning, under his tongue.

The Septarch was taller than the tallest of the guards by half a foot, and he wore black, some slick tough material that looked like rubber but moved differently. Over this was a sleek floor-length coat of what Leander finally realized was leather. Nobody in his Section had the kind of money it would take to afford leather, not to mention affording the kind of police harassment that would result from dressing in a style so violently opposed to the programmed norm.

Leander wanted to draw him. Leander needed to draw him. He needed this so badly that his right hand wound itself into a cramp, and he could smell ink and paint and pencil shavings.

The Septarch was coming closer. His hair was so dark it was almost blue, falling like water down his back. He moved like a snake, as if every one of his joints were calibrated perfectly, greased and frictionless. His eyes were black, and he wore brown paint on his lips. A twisted symbol was etched in black on his forehead, a cross with a loop at the top and an arrow pointing down the bridge of his nose

from the vertical bar, and a straight black line was drawn along each of his cheekbones. His face was long and angled, his skin seamless, absolutely white, as if it had been bleached.

Oh, my god. Paint. He's wearing paint.

He was no fairy tale, and he blazed in Leander's eyes like a supernova.

New. Knew.

Oberon.

He was a predator, and Leander felt like a bird, nailed moveless and terrified by the eyes of a snake.

The Septarch's eyes glided over the waiting children, missing nothing, but stopping nowhere. His face remained expressionless, and he did not seem to breathe. When he spoke his voice was a shock, low and rich, almost casual. "No. None of these," he said to one of his guards.

The man nodded, his jaw tight. "Yes, Lord Septarch."

Soren sagged behind him, almost collapsing under the weight of her relief.

And Oberon turned to leave.

Leander said one word.

"Wait."

It was deafening in the stillness, echoing in the vast space of the gym, repeating over and over. Wait. Wait.

Soren made a desperate, terrified sound, more breath than voice, and tried to cover Leander's mouth. She missed, and her hand spread awkwardly over her son's face, pulling his head backwards into her lap.

Oberon froze.

He turned on his heel, pushed one of his startled guards out of his way. He stopped so close to Leander the toe of his boot brushed the boy's knee.

The Septarch looked down at the boy, straight into his eyes. Leander looked up at him, his lungs locked. Oberon's eyes were not just dark. They were without whites, without pupils, black as oil, and they reflected nothing. They reached down into his brain, into his gut, and burned him there with cold that spread tendrils into all his limbs, and left him frozen.

The Septarch said two words.

"Take him."

The guards reached for Leander.

He didn't see them. He had fallen into Oberon's eyes, and he was still there, small and cold. A voodoo cocktail of acid and adrenaline was thundering through his chest.

Soren grabbed Leander out of their hands, tore him away from them so hard that he sprawled at her feet. "Get away!" she shrieked.

Paul's hands were moving in slow motion, too late to stop her. It was already done.

She struck the Septarch in the chest, with both fists. He stepped back, cringed as though she had burned him. Something like terror crossed his face for a microsecond, before the careful mask of coldness closed over it. Soren raised her hands, poised to hit him again.

Oberon raised his left hand, a clipped, practiced gesture. Everything was moving frame by frame, like a series of photographs, and Leander didn't understand any of it.

The sound came, not a wail, not a loud report, not even an antimatter hiss.

Three snicks, so close together they were almost in unison.

Soren never saw the guards move.

The bolts appeared, one in her neck, two in her chest.

Leander opened his mouth to scream, and could not.

She was transfixed, nailed to air, her back arched, head crooked, arms bent and out, her hands limp for the space of a heartbeat.

Then, the bolts detonated, and the blood came.

She flew back. A sheet of warm fluid slammed into Leander, and he was blind, and everything was red.

The metal chair behind her collapsed under her with a clatter, taking Paul's chair with it. He made a terrible noise, a hoarse ragged scream, and tried to put his hands on his wife. Instead, he put them in her, in the vast gaping hole that had replaced her chest. Organs pulsed there, charred, still forcing out gouts of obscene liquid.

Leander blinked. Blew out a hard breath he didn't remember taking. Tiny fragments of his mother's bone fell from his lips. He inhaled, tasted acid, copper, chemicals, ashes.

He moved his mouth to say, Mom. Nothing came out.

I was known to go in the opium dens when I was a little older than you. Who could blame us, the world being what it is?

Leander's not feeling well. I'm going to help him dress.

Get away.

"Mom," he said, and nobody heard him.

Oberon spoke again. Half his face was splattered crimson, covering his black paint. "Take him."

The guards picked him up, pulled him to his feet. There was no sound. It was a vacuum.

Leander stumbled forwards twenty feet and fell to his knees. His backpack fell over his shoulder, dragged him down on all fours. He looked up through his hair, and the red-haired kid swam before his eyes, clinging close and safe to his red-haired parents. You're dead, the kid mouthed, and he raised his hand, and crossed himself, and looked away.

Leander's hand slipped in blood, and his chin struck the floor. His teeth snapped closed around his tongue, and his mouth filled with the

taste of copper.

His father was still screaming, somewhere behind him, and there was no sound, only texture, and it was all tangled together with the pain in his tongue, his knees, his stomach.

Green lines. A basketball court.

He spit, and the green lines were gone. Red. Green. Christmas.

His mother laughing, hanging strings of popcorn on their tiny illegal Christmas tree, His father, behind her, laughing too, wrapping his arms around her waist to drag her to the floor, tickling her until she shrieked.

New. Knew.

The guards picked him up again, hands under his arms, at his elbows, an arm around his waist. They were gentle. He looked for the Septarch. Oberon was standing still, looking vaguely towards the ceiling, looking either bored or disgusted.

He turned his face into a violet suit of armor, eyes open wide, and his eyelashes brushing steel. Gagging. Air. There was no air.

He fell again. This time, he never made it to the floor.

fairy tales

cap·tive (kàp¹tîv) *noun*

1. *One, such as a prisoner of war, that is forcibly confined, subjugated, or enslaved.*
2. *One held in the grip of a strong emotion or passion.*

adjective

1. *Taken and held prisoner, as in war.*
2. *Held in bondage; enslaved.*
3. *Kept under restraint or control; confined: captive birds.*
4. *Restrained by circumstances that prevent free choice: a captive audience; a captive market.*
5. *Enraptured, as by beauty; captivated.*

He was in his bed. Someone was poking him, and the neighbor kid's

mom was yelling across the street, Stop that crying. Oberon will get you.

He opened his eyes. They were gummy, and he rubbed at them. There was an instant of panic; he was sitting up, and he couldn't stand. His hands found the buckles. A harness. He was in a transport. He exhaled, slowly, aching. His bag was tucked under his feet. He kicked it gently with his heel, making sure it was really there.

The crying was still there. He blinked, his eyes adjusting, and saw that there were nine other seats, four of them occupied by the dim forms of sleeping children. The poking came again and he looked down. A little girl, was sitting in the cramped aisle, tugging at his pants and crying. "Mister, are you awake?"

He scrubbed at his eyes one more time. "I'm awake."

"Open the door. I wanna go home."

He sighed. "I can't open the door. The accelerat--um, the transport is going really really fast." And it's locked, he added silently.

"I don't wanna go to jail," she said, smearing snot across her face with the palm of her hand.

Leander grimaced, leaned over, the buckles trying to dig holes into his ribs, and dragged her up into his lap. She was wet enough to squish against his thighs, and heavy as hell.

He scrubbed her face off as best he could with the tail of his shirt, feeling dampness spreading into his crotch. "What's your name?" he asked to distract her, groping over his head. There it was. He flicked the switch and a tiny dim light came on.

"Jyana," she said around her fingers, staring at him curiously. She was adorable, with huge blue eyes and hair that was almost white. "Why're you all bloody?"

"I fell down." he said shortly.

She nodded, slowly, and her eyes relaxed. She understood that. Then the panic again. "Can't you open the door? I don't wanna go to jail," she begged, the tears starting again.

"We're not going to jail," he said, wishing she would just go to sleep. His head was killing him, and he didn't want to think, at all, about anything.

Jyana chewed her lip. "Where're we going?"

To hell, in a handbasket, and guess what? The most beautiful motherfucker you've ever seen is there waiting for us. He has eyes like ink and he's going to suck out our brains.

He had the sudden urge to burst out laughing. Or crying.

Or screaming.

She was poking him again. "Where?"

"To heaven. We're so special that we get to go to heaven early," he lied.

"I want my mommy," she said, leaning her head on his chest.

"Me too," he muttered, closing his eyes.

"Will she be there in heaven?"

"Yeah. She'll be there," he said, and swallowed hard.

"You're nice," she mumbled, sleepy.

I'm not that nice, he thought.

His hair was drying in spikes. That was where his mother was. In his hair, on his skin, in fragments down in his lungs.

"Knew," he whispered, but Jyana was already asleep.

He listened to her breathing for a long time.

impact

Something woke him. Leander lay still, his eyes still closed, and tried

to figure out what it was.

The transport. The vibration of the engine had stopped. And Jyana was no longer in his lap. Her damp warm weight was gone, and the front of his body was freezing cold.

He opened his eyes a crack, without moving. The world was busy and jagged, and it noticed his arrival and swarmed in on him. One of the guards was there, watching him. He was a young man, slim, only a little taller than Leander, with light hair and friendly brown eyes.

You're one of them. One of the ones who pulled the trigger. And you're also the one who carried me.

He wrapped his arms around his chest. There was a hole there, and he had to keep his insides in and the outside out.

Hole. Someone had shot him, with exploding bolts. And they'd carried his mother away. He'd been there dying, and watched this man carry her out of a school that had never existed.

"I know you're awake," the guard said, and his voice was not unkind. "I'm not going to hurt you. I'm here to take you to another doctor. He's just going to ask you some questions."

Questions. Those were those tricky fucking things. They made people say other things. "Do I have a choice?"

The guard hesitated. "They'll have to examine you again. I know they hurt you before, but it won't be the same doctor."

Leander hated them all. Doctors. Humans. "Why do I have to be examined again?" His brain was doing it again, talking all by itself, bypassing his mouth and sending words out straight through the holes. He hoped it was making sense. He didn't want to go into recon.

The guard sighed, and Leander realized he didn't like this either. "That's how it's done. I'm sorry."

Word. There was a word that meant a person, only one specific person. Name? "What's your name?"

The man looked surprised, as if no one had bothered to ask him that before. "Theren," he said.

Now. A word. It was magic, you said that word and it only meant...that...one...person. But the word didn't mean anything yet. "Who are you, though?"

It was spinning, and it wasn't the room at all. It was his brain. His marvelous brain. He realized he was watching his thought processes, unfolding in careful equations. And he said, "You're not a guard at all. I know you. Behold, a pale horse, and the name of the rider was death, and hell followed with him."

There were beasts, then, all around him, in the space between reality and his mind, and he held up his hands, but they couldn't touch him. He was awake, then.

Theren sighed again. "I'm your guard." he said, and it sounded as if he were very far away, speaking through deep water.

Leander raised his hand, and pointed at him, and said, "Murderer. I know you. I see right through that face you wear."

Transport. A big heavy electric thing that took you from point A to..."Where are we going?"

"It's a planet past the Reach. It's called Omega-7-18."

Planet. You couldn't even leave the surface in an electrocar. That was why it was called a surface transport. He had no idea what was going on, now, and his brain gave him his next line, and he said "Can you breathe the air?"

"It's cold, but, yeah, you can breathe."

Leander's head was heavy, and colors trailed across his vision. He thought, I understand everything, and his brain said, "Is it pretty?"

"Pretty?"

"The planet."

"No," Theren said. "It isn't."

Safe. Guard. Wait.

"Theren. Are you guarding me from, or guarding me for?"

The man didn't look into his eyes. "Yes."

cryptogram

He was led out of the transport, into a tiny elevator, and into another room, like somebody's office. Theren brought him food--chicken soup in a shatterproof bowl, milk, cookies that were made with real sugar. Sugar was currently more expensive than cocaine, and

cookies smell like cookies like violets like home like milk like

blood

Theren went and waited in the corridor, leaving Leander alone. He ate mechanically, set his empty bowl on the edge of the desk.

The doctor came in after only a few minutes. It wasn't the same one who had hurt him. This man was older, maybe sixty, his skin worn and lined and tough, as though he'd lived off-world. His hair was steel-gray, cut short and careless. His eyes were blue, and looked too young for his face. He was carrying an electric notepad. He gave Leander a crooked smile, and flopped beside him in one of the too-soft chairs, instead of behind the desk.

"Cookie," Leander told him. He knew this doctor wouldn't understand the depth of meaning in the word, didn't understand sugar and texture and the art of swallowing without choking. He wondered if the cookie was falling in little chewed-up glops through the holes. He put his hand on his chest to see, but he didn't feel anything.

Cayle nodded. "Do you want another one?"

Leander shook his head. He didn't want anything.

"Ok, your name is...." He checked his notepad. "Leander. I'm Cayle. I just want to ask you some questions--"

Questions. He already had all the answers to the doctor fucking questions questions QUESTIONS. "I'm fourteen. My State Id is 467-8471 D-12. No, I'm not genetically engineered, and no, I've never had sex, not with girls or boys," he said around a mouthful of cookie.

"Anything else?"

Cayle laughed. It wasn't a mean laugh--it was crooked and honest. It was like broken glass hitting Leander. He cringed. That looked like trauma to Cayle, but there wasn't much he could do about it. "I'm not about to ask those kinds of questions. You've probably already had quite enough of that."

Well, this guy was going to pretend to be friendly. How nice. Leander glared. He felt his body decide to have an emotion, and it clicked into place like a program, and he thought it was called either anger or hate. "So you're a shrink. I had all those questions in counseling. You've probably already got the records."

"I'm not a shrink." Cayle patted the pockets of his white lab coat, and came up with a cigarette case. He glanced up at the enviro sensors, and stood up and made a quick trip to the door to deactivate the smoke detectors. He settled down again, and lit up. "And I don't give a damn what Earth's state doctors think about you. I was trained offworld a very long time ago, and I really don't care what the R of E thinks about anything. I like to draw my own conclusions."

Leander thought about that. Not bad. The guy could be pretending, true. He was already a prisoner anyway. Not much to lose. Besides, he should be bleeding to death pretty soon anyway. "So ask."

Cayle logged into his notepad. It had dual screens, and he flipped one of them up so that Leander could see it. He typed something, and an inkblot flickered onto the screen. "All right, Leander. I want you to tell me what each one of these looks like to you. There are no wrong answers, just say whatever pops into your head. Okay?"

He was in recon already. That was it. He was in recon and they had drugged him up so bad his brain was making up this bizarre shit to pass the time. He was really in that same small room he remembered from before, with six or seven of them screaming at him about Jesus until some crushing guilt and panic wrapped him in yellow tentacles, and he wanted to disappear...

Cayle's side of the screen displayed readings of Leander's heart rate, breaths per minute, and temperature. Leander eyed that, but didn't ask. This doctor probably thought he was too stupid to understand the charts anyway.

They're always spying on you, he thought, with the kind of resigned angry resentment that the State government seemed designed to inspire.

This was new, and he didn't like this game. The gears in his head were grinding furiously, and he wondered if he should lie, but the doctor would know that and what good would the truth be doing him anyway? And what was he saying, in that tiny interrogation exorcism chamber, out in the real world?

"Okay," he said, cautiously.

He studied the first one. "Birds."

Cayle nodded, and clicked it to the next picture. "Thunderstorm clouds....a butterfly....one of those gargoyle things they used to have on churches."

It was hard. He was having a hard time telling the difference between the pictures in his head, the ones in the air, and the ones on the screen.

"A dead squished cat like an electrocar hit it...a bruise...a 4798p0-0 alpha circuit..."

The game went on, and Leander tired of it quickly. On about the fifteenth picture or so, he snapped, "It's an ink blot. Did I pass?" That was so cool, he almost applauded himself, and he decided he'd won at least a point or two.

Cayle folded the screen he was looking at back down. "You can't fail, Leander. Just one more game, and we're done, all right?"

He sighed. You fucker. "Fine."

"I'll say a word, and you say the first word it makes you think of. Okay?"

He nodded, frowning. Something in the back of his mind was droning about left brain right brain verbal spatial visual unconscious mind. He was sure it wasn't even speaking English.

"Love."

bolt butterfly blood bone. "Danger," he said.

"Danger."

eyes ink falling falling paint lips eyes. "New."

"New," Cayle said back to him.

A look crossed his face so quickly the doctor couldn't have said what emotion it was. His heart rate went up, and his temperature went up half a degree.

hands eyes hands fingers falling... "Wonderful."

"Wonderful."

Leander shifted in his chair. Another half a degree. Cold blood taste metal falling "Fear."

"Fear."

He closed his eyes. pain guilt despair falling blood butterflies eyes like ink like ink, like "Love," he mumbled.

"Love," Cayle said, again.

Leander didn't answer.

pain more and there is no... god torch a dark man in my room in my head eyes eyes

The readout informed Cayle he'd just had an adrenaline rush.

Then he whispered, "Wait."

Cayle didn't understand. He waited.

Leander opened his eyes to glare at him, and said, "Can I go now?"

Cayle looked at him for a long time. Then he said, "All right. They've got more tests to do, but you'll be sleeping, and you won't feel a thing. You'll even sleep right through the space transport."

Space. Transport. A new planet and no, it isn't pretty. "Where's Theren?"

"He's waiting for you. He'll be with you for the trip, don't worry."

Leander was getting sick of that. "I'm not worried about him, or the goddamned trip. I don't trust him."

"Why not?"

Why not? Because he works for the man who...

"I just don't is all," the boy said, too quickly.

The doctor was filling a syringe with pale green fluid. Leander held out his arm, staring at the floor, feeling like a goddamn science project. He didn't ask what it was, and he didn't resist. He didn't care.

Cayle led him out into the corridor. A half-grav stretcher was there waiting. "Don't be nervous. We're going to take good care of you."

Shut up, Leander thought.

"How nice," he said, as sarcastically as he could. Cayle tried to help him onto the stretcher. The boy pushed his hands away and climbed on himself.

The sheets were like snow against his skin, starched and impersonal. Love is death, he thought, and he didn't know where he'd heard that before, but the voice was uncanny and familiar, and it spiraled around him like an ion storm.

"Are you cold, son?" the doctor asked, and he was either concerned or an extremely good actor, and he pulled one of those pink woven blankets the hospitals used up over Leander.

It didn't help. It only wrapped the cold around him, and he felt teeth in him, in a place he hadn't known he had. "No," he said, and an unreasonable benevolence swept over him, and he said, "I'm sorry I snapped at you."

"It's all right. Just try to relax. Do you need anything?"

"Could I...have some water, maybe?"

Cayle frowned, and produced a military-issue canteen. "I'm afraid I've drunk out of this already, but..."

"I don't care if you don't," Leander said, and the man unscrewed the cap and held it to his lips, and Leander tasted rain, and nearly choked, but the water rushed down his throat, cool and clean, and he lay back, and sighed. "What are they going to do?" he asked, out of curiosity more than concern.

"I think...you might have been, ah, hurt during your exam."

A furious jagged cramp made Leander's knees come up, as though the man had just reminded him he was in pain. "Will it hurt, whatever they do?"

"No. Not at all. You'll be asleep, and it'll stop your hurting."

No surgery could do that, Leander thought. "Okay," he whispered, and he watched the ceiling rushing by, and then he was in a tunnel, and then there was only dark, and the sound of wind running past him, hurrying away to unknown things.

in loco parentis

Oberon sat at his desk, the papers in his hands. Ivory parchment. He skimmed the paper, searching the red ink for traces of erasure, a crooked letter, a space too short or long. It was perfect, and his eyes returned to the top of the page, reading more quickly than the most advanced graphic scanner. Behind him, on one of the wallscreens, an old film of an evisceration was playing. He'd left it on and forgotten it deliberately, for the benefit of anyone he dealt with here. General, pervasive fear tended to increase efficiency in most of his extensive staff.

"He was torn. Anally. Was he raped?"

The guard trapped in front of him swallowed hard. "No, my Lord. It was a minor tear, a scratch really, from his...resistance once the exam was already...in progress. It did require closure acceleration, and they gave him antibiotics to be safe...but it was in fact a minor injury, no threat to the boy's health. He struggled...they stunned him, and he was still struggling...it was necessary to restrain him forcibly..."

"He was stunned?"

The words fell into the silence like shrapnel.

The guard coughed, pale. "As I said, my Lord, he resisted...it was necessary..."

Oberon interrupted him, smoothly and quickly. "The doctor. Kill him. Impalement. The policeman, too. The serum, first, to rule out unconsciousness, that last Lot number we used, four-twelve? Stakes thirty feet long, twelve inches in circumference. The dull ones." He paused, and added, "Make whatever cuts are necessary for successful penetration."

"My Lord?" The guard's voice betrayed him. "My Lord, the doctor has been an examiner for fourteen years--"

Oberon raised his eyebrow. The man fell silent.

"Do you realize that this boy is the first human being to speak to me of his own free will in almost two hundred years?"

This was almost shouting.

Shouting meant blood.

The guard cleared his throat, his eyes searching for escape. There was only the wallscreen, and the Septarch in front of it, and the question hanging in the air. "No, my Lord, I did not realize that, but--"

"Haven't I been clear enough? Do I need to tell Equipment to prepare three stakes, or two?"

The guard closed his eyes.

Equipment didn't prepare the stakes at all.

They prepared oak dowel rods and the proper tools for rounding them for shipment, and the prisoners finished their stakes themselves.

Sometimes lovers were forced to shape them for each other.

He felt it, wood as thick as a man's arm driving into his intestines.

Sometimes they greased them with mineral oil.

Or gasoline.

Or nothing at all.

What was human decency, against that?

"I'll see to it," he said.

"Do that. Let me know when this is ready. I'll want to see them beforehand. And I want all of this recorded."

These were unnecessary orders, delivered out of spite. Everything was recorded, reviewed, filed, everything that touched his life at all, even in the smallest way. But it was fun, satisfying, to restate his demands at random intervals.

Oberon waited for nearly a full minute, watching the man suffer, then inclined his head a fraction of an inch towards the door.

The guard fled. He almost made it down the hall before the retching drove him to his knees.

Oberon listened for the space of a dozen heartbeats, satisfied. Torture without touch. He allowed himself to smile. There was no one there to see him. There was a camera droid in his office, true, but he had the only access code to its files, and there was no backup system.

He returned his attention to the file.

Leander Schaiden.

The Septarch ran one gloved finger over the name. He traced slow, careful circles around it, stared at it until he could close his eyes and see it etched in neon on his eyelids.

He tapped a button on his desk panel. "Have them prepare the Worm Chamber for my arrival. One hour," he said.

He waited until the signal light for received blinked on, and shut off the link.

Someone tapped at the door. He sighed, annoyed. "Come in."

A female attendant he hadn't seen before crept in, shaking, and said, "Theren sent this ahead for you. It was in the boy's things."

She laid it on his desk, and backed away. It was a small notebook, with EXTREMELY SECRET BOOK OF SACRED HOLINESS written on the front cover.

He glanced at it, pretending to be completely disinterested, and waved her away.

He waited until she had been gone at least five minutes, and picked up the notebook.

Something strange made him hesitate to open it.

He set it on the corner of his desk, and left it there.

the wasteland

Leander dreamed of being in a tiny room that spun around and around until the centrifugal force threatened to crush his lungs. There were lights, and there was a sense of fierce energy around him, under him.

After that he was being pushed around on a stretcher, and his mother was there, moving her lips in the shape of his name with the bolt in her neck bobbing up and down. She was as clear and vivid as a holograph, with his dark hair, green eyes, but her lips were white, and she did not blink.

He reached his hands out to her, and saw that they had become barbed hooks. Love is death, said a dark casual voice near his ear.

The bolt detonated. This time there was no blood. Instead she exploded in a blizzard of brightly colored confetti, and when he reached out his new hands to catch some, he saw that it was in the shape of tiny butterflies. Each one was marked with the strange looped cross Oberon had worn on his forehead. In the dream he thought they were tabs of acid, and he didn't want to taste them, but thousands of them were flying towards him, and his jaw was locked

open. He couldn't close his mouth.

He woke up in a hospital bed, drenched with sweat, shivering.

For a long time he didn't move. Moving meant thinking, and as long as he stayed still, nothing hurt. He rubbed his fingers together--that didn't count as moving--but the confetti was gone.

Finally he stretched his arms, opened his eyes.

He was clean.

His throat tightened.

Even her blood was gone.

He was dressed in a white shirt and pants woven of a substance so thin and soft he tugged at it to see if it would tear. It didn't.

He sat up, and Theren was leaning against the wall, watching him. "It's silk," he said.

The boy raised his hands to his throat. Something twinged in his right arm, and he looked down at a small round pink scar just below his wrist. "You took out the socket for my wristunit," he accused.

"Yes. The Septarch doesn't allow them. You've got the standard Sphere issue, now. Subdermal."

Leander shrugged. He'd hated that damned thing anyway. He wasn't sure he liked the idea of an implant, though. Then he thought of his new unit, waiting somewhere in Twelve for him to pick it up. It was eerie, and he shuddered. It would probably sit neatly labeled on a shelf somewhere for the next century. "So he'll know where I am, what I'm doing, all the time."

Theren's expression was strange. "He'll know."

A microchip? He squinted at the thick round scar. Did he care? Jesus, did it even matter if he cared?

Leander squirmed, slid gingerly off the edge of the bed. He wasn't dizzy, and he didn't hurt, not his knees, or his stomach, or even his tongue. No pain. Not outside, anyway. "Where's Jyana?"

"Jyana?" Theren looked puzzled.

"She had white blonde hair. Just little, like four or so. She was crying for her mother. I had her in my lap."

Theren didn't understand. "In your lap?"

Leander looked at him like he was a complete idiot. "She was crying," he said again. "She thought she was going to jail."

"The girl? All the other children are already in the station. They went on ahead about two hours ago. You were...some medical attention was necessary. I'm going to drive you to the Sphere in the anti."

Anti. AntigraV, a transport that never touched the ground, that didn't need underground magnetic tracks, that cost about half a million credits and could go up to four hundred miles an hour. Leander had spent hundreds of classes drawing them in the margins of his notebooks.

"A hovercraft?" He tried not to sound exited and failed. "I've never been in one of those."

Theren frowned. "They're less fun than you think. You'll see why they're used here soon enough. There's no other way to get around. Oh, here," he added, and reached down near his feet, and handed Leander his bag.

The weight was different. He opened it and rummaged around inside. "My journal. It's gone."

"I know. I'm sorry."

Leander looked at him, and saw that the man actually was sorry. He shrugged. "I was done with it anyway."

sodom

Omega-7-18 was a wasteland.

Leander thought it was water they were skimming over until he

looked closer. It was gray volcanic rock, sculpted in permanent rifts and cracks. The sky was deep orange, streaked with clouds the color of sewage, and a dim and distant sun was sinking into the horizon.

It definitely wasn't Heaven.

"Is it all like this?"

"All the habitable parts, yes."

Leander kept looking, waiting for grass, ocean, trees. Anything. There were only black rock formations, vaguely skeletal, and occasional bubbling pools of molten rock. The entire landscape looked as though it were wounded, rotting.

He sat back, disappointed and vaguely nauseous, and clutched his bag close to his chest. "You're right," he said to Theren, sitting close beside him. "It isn't pretty."

Theren reached over and set the controls for window of the cockpit to opaque without a word.

They hummed along in silence for a while. Then, Leander said carefully, "Do you work for Oberon?"

The craft jerked slightly. "You really should call him the Septarch. Yes, I work for him."

"Will I work for him?"

Theren pressed his lips together. "Sort of."

A million more questions presented themselves. Why are his eyes so black? Will he eat me? Is he a demon? Why did he fucking KILL MY MOTHER?

The boy drew in a long, shuddering breath. "Is it far?"

Theren toggled the window transparent again in answer.

"There it is," he said.

It was a black hemisphere so vast it could have been a part of a fallen moon. Four crooked, twisted towers marked the corners of an invisible

square around it. The land surrounding it was absolutely flat, and seemed even more scorched than the rest of the planet. Something at the top of the hemisphere jutted out into the air, spinning like a complex gyroscope. Leander stared at it until he realized it was some kind of relay system for a satellite.

"It's huge," Leander whispered, his knuckles white on the straps of his backpack.

"Yeah. And that's not even a fifth of it. Most of the Sphere is underground."

They drew nearer. Soon the dome was so tall Leander couldn't see the top of it anymore no matter how he craned his neck. "Does it have a shield?"

"It doesn't need one. It would take a supernova to burn through that. You can't scratch it, even with keradian drill bits. You can hit it with a pulse cannon from a foot away, and then put your hand right on it. It won't even be warm."

Weird, for a surface structure. Expensive, too. Leander studied the satellite relay again, turned his head to look back at the nearest of the four towers jutting up from the ground. It looked, to his undernet-trained eyes, like a nacelle housing a mercury gyre drive. "Can it fly?"

Theren stared at him, then gave a nervous laugh and shook his head. "You ask too many questions, kid."

Theren typed something into a remote unit. A wedge opened along an invisible seam in the side of the Sphere, just wide enough for the craft to slip inside. It closed instantly, and the blade of dull light vanished. There was no deafening sound, no huge thud, and just a humming whine of vast mechanics moving the plates of the dome.

It was absolutely dark. The lights of the control panel hovered in space, a tiny navigational screen tracing a line for Theren to follow.

"I'm never going back to Earth again, am I?"

Theren didn't answer. He adjusted readings that didn't need adjusting, and pretended he hadn't heard the question.

The hovercraft pulled into a docking bay. It jolted as the clamps

closed on it, and the recharge cycle began. The dome slid open, and Theren climbed out and lifted Leander out, ignoring the face he made at that. "I'm supposed to restrain you," he told the boy, "but I don't like that, and I won't do it if you give me your solemn promise that you won't do anything stupid."

"Like run?"

"Exactly. It's both our necks if you try that."

Leander paled at that, but he nodded. "I promise. No running."

And he meant it.

That was the scary part.

There was no point in running, now, anyway. Where would he run to? And...evil curiosity...what, exactly, was he running from?

Theren led him out of the docking area, into an elevator. It descended so rapidly the boy put out his hand, grasped the railing. "Where are we going?"

"For now, the Gallery. It's where kids your age are ke--where they stay."

Are kept. Leander ran his hand through his hair, trying very hard not to look somewhat feminine.

From the elevator they went through a dark stone hallway. There were torches--actual torches, with real fire--set at regular intervals. Leander stared at them. He'd never seen fire, really, except at executions. Or at his own event-art terrorist Tri-Six exhibitions, and that had always been from a distance. He tried to stop to examine one more closely, but Theren's hand on his shoulder pushed him forward.

"Is it all like this?"

"No. Just this wing. Most of it is...worse."

"Who designed it?"

"The basic structure is...it's alien, but the Septarch made a lot of changes when he took the title."

"Took the title? Is it like, an office?"

"No. There was only one other before him, and he's dead. Three hundred years or so."

"Did Oberon kill him?"

"Kid, everything is recorded here, all right? You shouldn't use his name like that. Only his doctor gets to do that. Yes, he killed him, and if you want to know how, just wait. Every year on the anniversary of his death The Septarch plays the film of it."

"Why doesn't his doctor have to call him that?"

Theren sighed. "His doctor is a regen...a clone of the first doctor, with the memories reconstructed. Legend has it that he was here since the Septarch took the throne, and that he was the only one who helped him when he...when Acharis was the Septarch, and Oberon was his prisoner."

"So they're friends, him and this doctor?"

"Friends? No. The Septarch has no friends."

Leander thought about that. That made him sad, and he wasn't sure why. No wonder he was so...no wonder he was like that. It would suck completely to be immortal and not have anyone to talk about it with. "Aren't you his friend?"

"Leander, I've had it with the twenty questions, all right?" Theren snapped, in a tone of voice that told Leander the answer was no.

They went through three sets of huge steel doors, with keypads to unlock them. Then they turned left, and there was an archway with a final locked door.

The room they went into was long and narrow, and separated into cells by iron bars that ran from the floor to the high vaulted ceiling. There were only two torches here, beside the door, and the rest of the room was in deep shadow. Leander stopped, backed into Theren. "This is the Gallery?"

"Yes."

"But it's...like a prison."

"I know," Theren said quietly. "It's not as bad as it looks. It's clean, and there aren't rats or anything."

Rats. Leander hadn't thought of that. Long yellow teeth. Long wormy pink tails, and little scrabbling feet.

He swallowed hard. "Are there going to be any other kids?"

"Just you and Camille."

"Camille?"

"She's right down here. She'll be in the cell just beside you." He paused. "Camille is...well, she's--"

He was cut off by a bloodcurdling shriek that nearly made Leander forget all about his promise not to run. There was a terrible clattering. Someone near the end of the row of cells was rattling the bars.

Theren stepped past Leander, walking quickly. "Camille, knock it off," he snapped. "I've got a new one, and you're scaring the shit out of him. It's not funny."

There was silence, then a girl's voice, bitter and hoarse. "Yeah? Well, bring him down here. I want to see my replacement."

Leander looked at Theren and shook his head. His throat hurt, and his eyes were bright with tears. "Do I have to stay here?" he pleaded.

Theren did something absolutely forbidden. He took Leander's hand and squeezed it quickly. "Leander, she's crazy," he whispered. "She's been here since she was eleven. She's seventeen now. She always does this to the new ones, but she's harmless. I promise you."

"Leander?" came Camille's voice, calmer now. "Is that your name?"

Leander looked at Theren. The guard nodded. "Yeah," Leander called out. "I guess I'm going to live here with you."

Silence. Then, "I like that name. I won't scream anymore. Are you...are

you mean?"

Leander didn't know quite what to say to that. "No. Not unless someone's mean to me first."

"Okay," she said, after a moment. "That's fair enough."

Theren took one of the torches from the wall, walked towards her cell, and Leander followed.

Camille was tall and so thin she looked ill, with redbrown hair and blue eyes. She was dressed in the same white silk as Leander, and she had one hand on the bars. She smiled at him, and he could tell by the light in her eyes that she was crazy, but she didn't look mean either.

Her cell had a small bed, a chair, and a little table. There was a curtain in the back corner, probably for whatever passed as a bathroom in this place. The cell beside hers was the last one, and it was furnished identically. It had a keypad set in the door, and Theren put in the code, shielding it with his cupped hand so Leander couldn't see. The door slid open. Theren stepped aside, not looking at the boy, and said, "This one's yours."

Leander stepped past him. He stood in the middle of his cell for a moment, and turned back to Theren. The guard wouldn't look at him. He sat on the edge of his bed, his bag cradled in his lap. Theren closed the door, and Leander bit his lip when the locks clicked into place.

Theren gestured at the keypad. "This red one, here, is if you need anything--if you're sick, or hungry, or if...if you need anything. I usually come in every couple of hours or so, but if you push that, I'll be here in less than a minute."

He turned to leave. Camille caught at his arm as he walked past. "Tell Oberon I hate him! Tell him I hope a tiger eats him!" she said fiercely, her voice shaking. "And ask him why he doesn't love me anymore!"

He removed her fingers, gently. "I'll tell him, Camille," he said.

"Promise me! Cross your heart, Theren!"

"I promise," he said, softly and patiently. "Cross my heart. Hope to die."

"Stick a switchblade in your eye," Camille added, and laughed like an animal.

Oh my God, Leander thought, shaking. What have I done?
He thought he was going to be sick, and he breathed in short, quick pants through his nose, and reached up and pressed his hand hard against the back of his neck, until the feeling passed.

Theren returned the torch to its place, and closed and locked the door behind him.

Leander was breathing very, very slowly. I'm not going to. I'm not going to. I'm not--

He burst into tears, and buried his face in his backpack. It smelled of his room, of home, and that made it worse, and he cried so hard he was almost sick. He could feel Camille watching him, and he didn't give a damn. Fuck her.

He cried for a long time.

"Hey," she said, softly.

He pushed his face harder against his bag, feeling the tape against his face, the smooth plastic stickers and little sharp pieces of wire, and the familiar lumps inside.

"Hey, Leander, come here."

He scrubbed his face and looked up.

She was sitting on the floor next to the bars that separated their cells, and stretched her arms through them, reaching towards him. "It's okay. Come here."

He did, still holding his bag. Something of him didn't want to move, didn't want to owe her anything. Still, he was hungry, in a terrible deep way, and contact was better than nothing, even with her, this lunatic, and his fellow prisoner.

He sat down on the floor, stiff and awkward, and she pushed and pulled at him until his back was against the bars, and reached her arms around him and hugged him, and pressed a dry, soft kiss to the back of his head. "Go ahead and cry. It's better to do it now. You

might forget how, later."

He was crying still. "What am I doing here? I want to go home," he choked out, sobbing.

"This is home," she said. "I'll be your mom for a little while."

She was crazy, and she wasn't his mother, and he could feel the bars digging into his shoulder blades, but she was human, and female, and her voice was gentle. She rubbed his shoulders, singing something tuneless, and she let him cry himself out.

After a while, her hands on his shoulders made the back of his neck feel funny, and he tried to think of a polite way to ask her to stop, even thought he didn't really want her to. Her fingers were soft, the tips of them like flower petals, and for a while he let her touch him. There were many things in him, still sharp enough to sting, that demanded he accept this small comfort.

"I'm tired," he said finally.

She patted him, and stood up. "The beds are okay. You should try to sleep." She stepped back over to her bed, drew back the covers to show him clean sheets, a thick mattress. "See?"

He stumbled over to his own bed. He climbed in with his bag, pulled the blankets up so she couldn't see him and pulled off the white shirt, and threw it.

His bag. It smelled like sweat and marijuana and silent masturbation and his mother's favorite laundry soap. It smelled like home. He held it close, its jagged decorations digging into his chest.

He squeezed his eyes tight so he couldn't see the flickering of the torches, and he hugged his bag to his chest, and pretended he was home.

"It'll be all right, Leander. He's a monster, but at least he's beautiful."

He didn't answer. He had no idea what to say to that anyway, but he agreed with both adjectives completely.

She sang for a while, and her voice was pretty, even if the words were mad.

...there was a man who lived in Leeds...who filled his garden full of seeds...and when his garden began to grow...it was like a garden full of snow, and when the snow began to melt, it was like a ship without a belt...

....began to sail...like a bird...without a tail...

a penknife...in my back...

...began to bleed...

He closed his eyes so tight it made his head ache, and inhaled the perfume of his bag, and thought, I'll wake up soon.

light and shadow

Camille's singing trailed off.

Leander didn't wake up.

He was finding it impossible to fall asleep to begin with.

It wasn't cold, but he drew the bedclothes up tight around him, and wished for more blankets. He felt...exposed. The entire Sphere was watching him, and the stone walls were studded with invisible eyes.

He could press the button, say he was cold. If he needed anything, that was what Theren had said, and so what if he just needed a blanket?

But that was chicken. That would really be to see Theren, a sort of familiar face, and that was chicken. Need was chicken. And chicken was dangerous.

He would just be cold, then.

It went in phases. He would begin to drift off, into that warm gray place where there were no thoughts, but just before he fell asleep he would remember where he was. It was a shock, like falling very suddenly into cold dark water, and a freezing heat would smash into

his stomach, and he would be absolutely awake, eyes wide and cringing away from the awful vast space of the Gallery, punctuated by the rows of iron bars.

Oberon.

He gave up and tried to imagine him, and there were only those eyes, and an impression of long white hands, terrible strength. His mouth. He couldn't imagine Oberon's mouth. He tried, and his mind produced an image of his mother's unspeakable wound, gaping open in nightmare red.

He tried to hold onto that, to hurt, to grieve.

He couldn't.

It seemed so far away. Earth. Death.

His mother...it seemed that her life had always ended that way. He had always known it all his life, deep in his bones. He had expected it.

To die, that way. Unzipped. Unfolded.

How would it be, to die that way?

That was a mistake, that thought.

His brain latched onto that, producing a wet screenplay on the backs of his eyelids. He saw those long white hands, and it seemed that his skin was frantic, suddenly, aching for friction, and there was a wrench down his spine that made him slide deeper into the bed, squirming.

Will I work for him?

Sort of.

But what would Oberon...The Septarch...do?

Sacrifice him to the devil? Make him work in a factory, or something?

That would explain the medical exams.

But why children, for manual labor?

That's not it, Leander, said that wise sarcastic adult voice that he only heard at night. You remember that execution you saw?

The man had been on the newsscreens for weeks, his photograph usually printed about descriptions of his sins, maddeningly vague: abominations against children.

The first public execution in three years.

People had come from as far away as Bethany to see it. Leander's entire school had gone. Attendance had been mandatory.

The man was just a man, with the kind of face no one looked at twice. His expression had been frantic, and yet, at the same time, oblivious. Like he had been looking at a different world than the narrow view from the stake he was bound to, the jeering crowds of pious onlookers.

So what does that have to do with it? Leander asked the voice.

It didn't answer.

Not in words, anyway.

He got a shadowy image, more a sensation, of a sticky ritual performed under the cover of darkness. There were whispered threats, tears, terror, and that desperate wonderful panic took him again. He dug his heels hard into the mattress, twisted the sheet in his hands.

I don't care how beautiful he is. He's a bastard. He killed my mother.

He gritted his teeth, determined to find the rage that had to be there, somewhere. He found only frustration, and inappropriate and intense anger at Soren.

Not Oberon. Soren.

Why didn't you just let him take me? What did you think, that you would punch him in the mouth like the neighborhood bully and he would start to cry and go home? Why did you have to do that?

Now, I'm supposed to hate him, whether I want to or not. I'm supposed to.

And I don't hate him, and so because of you I'm a failure, a traitor.

Couldn't you have just have let him take me? Then, I wouldn't have to pretend to feel guilty...

He couldn't find it, the guilt. The murder was like something that he'd dreamed, like everything else on Earth.

This was real.

He'd always known there was a place like this, behind the slogans and the crosses, crouching hidden underneath everything. He'd always known the State was like a group of children armed with sticks and stones, playing at cruelty with no idea where to even begin.

Emperor of All Things Unseen.

At least here, there were no illusions. The Septarch was vicious and he didn't pretend to be anything else.

Here, there would be no amateur cruelty.

There was a strange comfort in that.

Leander closed his eyes.

There were more that threats in his dreams, but after he woke up he would tell himself he didn't remember it.

After a while, he would begin to believe it.

addict

The boy.

The boy was crazy and desperate and damned.

He had asked for it, deserved it, craved it. He was a death addict and he would come, pleading, with eyes the color of the green sun and hair the color of espresso and skin like warm wet silk.

Warm. Wet. Virgin.

Silk.

The boy smelled of tea leaves, and he needed darkness. He dreaded it and craved it, because it was inside him already, burning him, and he longed to be devoured. The boy was prey. He was a skein of emptiness, potential pain waiting for teeth.

Dragon, dragon, burning bright, in this temple of the night.

Eat me alive. Swallow me.

Wasn't that how it had happened?

Oberon sighed. He groped behind him for the leather case, and fumbled it open. He loaded a needle and knotted the tourniquet, pulled it tight with his teeth. There was a song that went like that, wasn't there? Tasting rubber, tasting you, in the dying air...

The boy. The boy with his kitten face and curious eyes, frightened, but eager too. Curiosity. Cat.

He shot up far too much heroin and lay gasping. He could hear his mechanical heart pistoning far too quickly, whining in gear-stripping protest. He ignored it. It wasn't as if it would kill him.

Heroin. Something so deadly from something so innocent. Flowers.

Sylvia Plath had called them little bloody skirts. The skirts of women raped.

She hadn't said anything about little boys.

Perhaps in her reality that sticky possibility had not existed.

Forget about the boy.

"Septarch," he said. The word cut his lips, and he swallowed the taste of something purple and sharp.

The Emperor of All Things Unseen. That was so much to be the god of that it frightened him, sometimes. The Devil. He was The Devil, if there was one at all.

"Am I, am I?" he asked no one in particular. He climbed off his bed and knelt on the floor, buried his face in the bed, and shouted I hate you, muffled, into the bedclothes.

He sat up, stumbled to his feet.

It had to stop. No one could see him like this.

The boy.

He was nothing. He would collapse the way all the others did, into tears and revulsion, begging for something that Oberon had never been able to give. Mercy.

Forget about the boy.

"What boy?" he mumbled to himself, pressing the heels of his hands into his eyes. What boy? Which boy?

There had been hundreds of boys.

And only this one had ever looked him in the eye.

He turned, nearly falling, and struck out at the air. No. No.

"Something's wrong, something's wrong, something's wrong," he chanted, over and over to himself.

But there wasn't anything wrong. He wouldn't let there be anything, anything, anything wrong.

He left his room, walking crooked and crazy, and the heroin bit him with nuclear teeth and flung him headlong into the wall. He slashed at it, blind and snarling. He was dangerous now, oh yes. He liked to feel dangerous, and he stood there for a minute or so, feeling this soft, lethal amusement.

He meant to go to the Zoo, or the Crypt, maybe, but the drug lured him into a black and red place that pulsed with hunger and submission.

And he was at the entrance to the Gallery, with no idea how he'd gotten there.

Oberon stood in the archway that led into the Gallery, listening intently. He couldn't hear the boy at all, but his scent was here, faint and dormant. Sleeping.

It was absolutely lightless. He adjusted his sight, his eyelids pulling tight and smooth across the artificial lenses, and the room blinked into focus, the colors dim but discernable.

The soles of his boots were synthetic rubber, soundless on the stone floor. He walked past the cages. He could see the ghosts of children there, cringing away as he passed, cradling wounds, mouths silently gaping. They were whores, all of them, with their whining, pouting, pleading with wet lips and wide eyes. He wished he could give them flesh again. He could do it so much better if he'd had the chance to go over it, to go over them, one more time.

Only the last two cages on the right were occupied. Camille, smelling of gardenias and madness. And the last cage, rich with the warm, bright new aroma of sleeping boy.

The Septarch stopped in front of Leander's cage. His hands closed around the bars, and he pressed his forehead against them, inhaled deeply. It was an orange scent, copper and salt, and there was the sharp tang of sweat and fear underneath.

"Wait," Oberon whispered, trying out the word, trying to make it both order and plea. He couldn't make his voice sound like the boy's. He wanted to break open the doors, take this boy in his hands, wake him, terrify him.

Wait for what? Didn't you know what you were asking?

He touched the keypad, and the door slid soundlessly open.

The boy murmured in his sleep. One hand slid off the edge of the bed, his fingertips resting on the floor. He had torn off his white shirt. It was flung carelessly across the back of the single chair. Oberon picked it up, held it to his face for a moment, took a tiny fold of silk between his teeth and chewed at it, wet it with his tongue before he dropped it over the chair again.

He stopped inches away from the boy. He leaned close, and his hair swung over his shoulder and brushed the skin of the boy's narrow chest. He froze, not even breathing, but the boy didn't move.

Oberon bent closer, until he could feel Leander's breath against his neck. "Wait," he whispered again, trying to get it right, the sound, and the pitch. Still wrong. He brought his face so close his eyelashes grazed the boy's forehead, breathing him in. His hands were coming up, open.

No. You don't touch them. Not the first night.

But maybe...he wouldn't have to.

His hands went to his waist, and he keyed open his belt.

torture without touch

"Wake up."

It was barely a whisper, but it sounded like an explosion, and Leander was awake, freezing and knotted and terrified. He turned his head, and there was only a shadow. "What--"

"Don't talk. Not a word. Get on the floor. On your back."

He didn't understand, and he was up already, and it was cold enough to collapse his lungs, and he sat on the floor and lay down, awkwardly, the stone like ice under the bare skin of his back.

His teeth were rattling together, and he thought dimly, He's here, in here, with me. He's in here with me.

He couldn't see him. He couldn't see anything. He heard a faint stirring sound from Camille's cell, and part of him wanted to call out to her, but he didn't dare. Not a word.

He wanted to cry, but he was too scared to cry. The entire thing seemed too vivid, and he wasn't even sure it was actually happening. It might have been a nightmare. That was what it felt like, anyway.

He just lay there, and thought, Maybe this is all he wants. Just to scare me.

"Put your legs up. Hold them together, straight up."

He tried. It made him want to fall over sideways, and he tried spreading his arms out to balance. He was so afraid that he was almost numb, and unbelievably, he was still so sleepy he had to blink furiously to keep his eyes open.

"No. Keep your hands down. And move faster than that."

He managed it, finally. He was trembling, all over, and he could feel it already, the tension in his stomach muscles, in the small of his back.

"You can do better than that. Straight up. Point your toes."

That was so much worse that this game couldn't really be happening, it couldn't, and the pain was there, in the tendons behind his knees, in his thighs, a dull slow burn, and he had to force his knees not to bend.

But there was something underneath all of that. This desire, this need, to do it absolutely right.

"Now count. Count to two hundred."

Leander didn't understand, and he just lay there, and he whispered, "What?" again.

"Count. It's not that difficult. You start with one, remember?" came the voice again, sarcastic, amused, but something else, too, like anger.

It is you. It's you. Couldn't I just see you? If I could see you I might understand what it is that you want...

"One," he said, and something was crushing him, like an explosion deep in his chest, and his eyes were stinging.

He can see me. I know he can. What do I look like, lying here like this? Do I look scared? Do I look as scared as I am?

He made it to forty-six and his knees bent by themselves, and he heard Oberon make a noise like a hiss. "Hold your hand up."

He did, shaking, and something brushed across his fingers, and he caught it, and his fingers couldn't understand it. It felt like a long thick heavy strip of leather. Then he did, he knew, and he pulled his hand

away like he'd been burned. No. He can't. No.

"Get your legs straight again. Count."

"I...what...what number was I on," he said, and his voice had a new rhythm, and it shuddered in time with his heartbeat.

Oberon laughed. "One. You're on one. And it's five hundred, now."

He didn't have to start over again.

His spine was one long string of pain, and it kept pulling his head up, and the front of his neck and his shoulders and everything, and he couldn't even think about his legs anymore.

He didn't remember what anything else had been like. He had been doing this all his life, and his lips were moving, and he could hear counting, but he was sure it wasn't him anymore. The numbers were coming from the walls, from the air, and someone said, five hundred, and the counting stopped, and he was just saying five hundred over and over again, and he couldn't remember what number came next, and he wanted to scream.

"Put your legs down."

He couldn't, at first, and then he collapsed, and he couldn't breathe until he became afraid of what might happen if he didn't speak. "Now what?"

"Get back in bed."

He did, half-crawling, half-clawing, and he curled up there, with his hands tight behind his knees. He thought, please, no more, and the pain was already fading, cheating him.

Anything that had hurt that much shouldn't have gone away so quickly.

He felt like he hadn't been suffering at all, like he'd dreamed it.

There was a deafening metallic scrape, and a slam that stopped him breathing until he realized what it was--the door to his cell, opening again and slamming closed.

"Sweet dreams," Oberon told him, and then there was only silence.

He didn't sleep. He lay there, one aching skein of attention, waiting for a sound that never came.

Oberon stumbled out of the Gallery, aching, furious. He was panting, taking shallow violent breaths through clenched teeth. He keyed the door shut and closed his eyes, and left that way, following the scent of dark, of damp.

Camille listened until she could no longer hear him. She turned over, and stared into the dark, towards Leander. Her teeth drew blood from the inside of her cheek. "I hate you," she whispered, but she didn't know which one of them it was meant for--Leander, or herself.

fetish

Oberon ducked into the Worm Chamber, closed and locked the door behind him. His hands were already at the clasp of his collar. He peeled off the synthvinyl suit and dropped it, shuddering, tugged off his boots and stood naked.

The room was ready, as he had ordered. It was a circular shaft, thirty feet across, with a stark four-foot ledge that ran along the wall. A steel walkway led from the doorway to a rectangular platform in the center of the room. Both of these were lit by tiny running lights. Below that, it was a forty-foot drop to the floor, in total darkness.

The platform and the connecting walkway were still charged. The path tingled under his feet.

He reached the platform, and lay down there, listening to them. They didn't make sounds, exactly, but there was a sense of motion, below him, as though the entire floor were undulating, busy in a slow irrevocable way.

The domed ceiling was so far above him, only a shadow.

His left hand found the controls and rested there, trembling.

Leander's hand, fingertips brushing the stone floor of his cell.
Leander's hand on the controls, covering his own.

He began to program the sequence. He set the timer for four hours, changed his mind and moved it up to six. He chose the lowest possible speed of descent, and activated it.

For an instant there was nothing, then a faint jolt as the walkway slid out of its housing in the side of the platform, retracted into the wall just below the doorway. He turned his head, and he could see his clothes there, dimly, in a crumpled heap of vinyl and chrome.

No way back, now. Even he couldn't jump fifteen feet across empty space, not with any hope of landing on the ledge.

If I pushed you, in here, little boy. If I pushed you in here, and you didn't break your neck on the way down...would you scream? Would you feel them, and cry out for mercy? Would it echo in this room, your screaming?

...my screaming?

The platform hummed under him, and began to move, sinking. He could hear the gears whining, muffled by inches of stone. The current was still running, just strong enough to sting the softest parts of his skin. He flexed his shoulders, turned over onto his stomach and pressed his face, his tongue against the metal.

Ten feet. Eight feet. Six feet.

The descent paused, and the controls chimed at him, letting him know he had ten seconds to abort the sequence and send the platform up again. Otherwise, it would sink down to the bottom of the shaft--and stay there for the next six hours, leaving him there no matter what he did to the controls.

He waited.

It chimed again, and began sinking.

The sequence was now irreversible.

The air was colder, suddenly, and so damp he could feel water condensing on his skin.

The air was colder, suddenly, and so damp he could feel water condensing on his skin.

The platform settled, clicked into place a few inches below the layer of wet soil covering the floor. Clods of dirt crumbled in, sprinkling his arms, his legs, and his back. He curled up on his side, his head pillowed on his arm, dragged his free hand through the dirt. The electricity that kept them away from the platform was switched off.

In fifteen minutes, the six cylinders set vertically in the walls would begin to open, one by one. Each was ten feet in diameter, filled with thousands and thousands of worms. When each one had been opened, the room would be three feet deep in them.

There were caterpillars, centipedes, infinite variations on the earthworm--every species from the quadrant that couldn't swallow him. The stings wouldn't harm him, of course, although there would be pain, agony even...but pain wasn't the purpose of this chamber.

He had other rooms to suit him when he felt the hooks of that particular appetite.

The few worms that were already there had begun to investigate him. He left them there as a prelude, for psychological reasons, even though the only one he ever subjected to this particular torture was himself.

He wondered if they remembered him, or if he was a new discovery to them every time.

They were nuzzling cold at his toes. One of them wriggled against the back of his neck, under his hair. It was no bigger than his little finger. Once the pipes opened, the big ones would come in, some of them thicker than his arm.

There was a shudder at that thought, of either dread or anticipation. He wasn't sure which.

He groped in the dark and found a tiny one, an earthworm as soft as a newborn's liver. He laid it across his lips. Horror. Lust. It wriggled

there, wandered cold up along his cheekbone, across the bridge of his nose, leaving a damp sticky trail.

There was a pneumatic hiss, and the sound of grating metal.

The first cylinder was opening.

He was breathing harder, faster.

There was the sudden ticklish scrape of myriad tiny legs across the back of his knee. A millipede. He pressed one muddy hand to his mouth, bit hard at his palm, shuddering. More. He would be buried in them, soon, and there was no way out. He turned, looked up at the dim glow of the doorway, miles above him. No way out.

It happened the way it always did. He felt two of them, then four, then hundreds. The fourth cylinder opened, then the fifth. The prick of more miniature legs. The rough fur of a caterpillar, low on his stomach, and the bright agonizing flare of the first sting, in the delicate skin just below his navel. And the slick cold soft ones, always those, and he spread out his arms, and they were all over him.

Panic. Only for an instant, and, then, submission.

There were no individual sensations. It was a blur, thousand lips, a thousand fingers, everywhere, and tiny vivid flashes of pain that wound together into a single merciless burning.

He closed his eyes, and one of them oozed along his eyelid, curling icy behind his ear, then a rush of them, and he couldn't open his eyes at all. His face was covered.

He was nothing to them. Only landscape, only architecture.

Leander's ghost was above him, in the doorway, and he broke open the casing for the keypad.

Wait, Oberon cried up at him, and this time his voice was just like the boy's.

It was too late.

The boy pulled out bright loops of wire, and flung them down into the shaft, where they were lost, the worms twining around them.

Now the platform would never rise, ever again.

Mercy. Please, he thought.

There was none.

The comfort in that closed over him like a warm cocoon.

Oberon opened his mouth, and ceased to breathe. He didn't need to, not anymore.

Not here.

contact

The chiming of the platform brought him out of it. It was the warning that it would begin its ascent in four minutes, so that he would be on it if he had crawled out into the rest of the room.

Oberon struggled up onto his hands and knees, his hair hanging in his face, clotted with dirt. He crawled over to the platform and collapsed there. The current clicked on, and he bit back a cry at the burn of it on his bitten skin.

The worms were fleeing the electricity, oozing away from him. He started breathing again, and his lungs ached, fighting to stay closed. Inertia. The tendency of a nonmoving object to stay in that state...was that da Vinci? Einstein?

The jolt and the platform began to rise, more quickly than it had lowered. His arm hung over the edge, his fingers loose and streaked with dirt. There was earth gritting in his teeth, and he was sticky, filthy. He spit, licking mud from his lips. At the top Cayle would be waiting, the only attendant who ever saw him this way.

The plank extended itself, locked into the side of the platform. For an instant he saw Leander standing there, in the shadows of the archway, and he raised his hands and covered his face, trembling. When he looked again it was only Cayle, old and bent in his violet armor. He was the ninth Cayle, each a clone of his predecessor. This one was in

his sixties, and he would need to be repaired...replaced...soon.

The syringe in Cayle's hand was loaded with a combination of antihistamines and antivenins. The solution would have killed an unaltered human being, if the stings hadn't done so already.

Oberon couldn't stand--neurotoxins couldn't kill him, but they made him perilously clumsy--and Cayle went across the walkway, stepping carefully, glancing below him in apprehension.

"You'd never feel them," Oberon told him, reaching out for the syringe. "It's a long drop."

Leander was already awake when Theren came in. He was holding something folded, and he had a grim look on his face. "He wants to see you," he told the boy. He held the clothes through the bars. "Put these on. You can go behind the curtain, if you want."

Leander stared at him. He couldn't breathe, and his heart started slamming so fast he thought it would burst.

It was too soon. He wasn't even used to the Gallery yet. He couldn't take any more input, any more terror. He didn't have the energy to be in the same room as Oberon. Not again. Not after last night.

He stood up to take the clothes, and his exhausted aching knees buckled and dropped him back onto the edge of the bed.

Camille laughed hoarsely, sitting in the floor in the far corner of her cell, rocking. "Poor Leander," she said, and laughed again. "Does it still hurt? I had to start over three times. I had to get to seven hundred before he was satisfied."

Theren sighed. Now he understood, better than he wanted to. He keyed open the door and stepped in. He shook out the bodysuit, dark red synthetic that was shiny as blood, and he pulled Leander to his feet. "I don't want to dress you in front of her," he said, tilting his head towards Camille, "but I have about half an hour to do this, and we still have to go to the lab first."

"I don't care about her," Leander said numbly. "The lab?"

Theren was pulling him out of the white silk. "He wants you changed,"

he said.

Leander tore himself away from Theren, his voice high and faint. "Changed?" Changed how? His imagination spun frantically--a mutant, a reptile, one of those brainless things they used to do road work--and came up with the worst possible result--a blank.

Theren pulled him back again, pulled off the silk pants with businesslike efficiency. "Don't panic. It won't hurt. He wants you painted, and he wants them to make your hair longer."

"Why?"

You know why. Yes you do. Don't give me that look, whispered his little sarcastic voice.

Theren stood him up, muscled him into the bodysuit and zipped it up from waist to neck. Over that there was a dark red cloak, and there were red boots. "Nobody asks him why. We just do it, whatever it is."

He pulled Leander's wrists behind him, took a set of restraints from his belt and clamped them around the boy's wrists.

I won't do this. Jesus, I'm not a goddamned convict. No way am I going to do this.

Leander hissed, and twisted around, teeth bared.

"Don't," Theren snapped. "I don't like this any more than you do, and I don't want to have to drug you, you got that?"

He pulled Leander out of the cell, hurried him down the corridor.

Camille waved bye-bye solemnly, with the tips of her fingers.

They clamped something over his head that tingled and itched, and held him down and put silver paint around his eyes, on his lips. Leander struggled at first, until Theren took his face in his hands and stared at the boy, without saying a word.

He grew still, and pretended none of it was happening, and they unfastened whatever-it-was from his head and his hair spilled out,

past his shoulders now. It was strange. He thought he might like it, after a while.

They brushed his new hair and snipped at it, cut it in a careful angle along his jawline, and sprayed something in it that smelled like candy, and gave him back to Theren.

He caught a brief glimpse of himself in a mirror.

I look like either an angel, or a whore, he thought, wound up in a strange tangle of wonder and dismay.

"Now," Theren said, rushing him through a long vast corridor with the same torches, and alien letters painted on the walls, "You look at the floor unless somebody tells you otherwise. You don't say anything. If he tells you to do anything, you do it, no matter what it is. You got all that?"

Couldn't you tell me it's going to be okay? Couldn't you tell me what the hell this is all about?

He had a terribly vivid sense of Soren, then. His mother. He could smell her, could hear her voice.

"Why do you do this? Why is this your life?"

Theren stared at him, and something cold settled over his face. "You won't last a week," he said.

Fuck you too, Leander thought.

Theren opened a door and shoved Leander into a new room, hard enough to make the boy stumble.

It was a wide round room, damp and shadowy with a low ceiling, and things were painted on the walls that made Leander glad to look at the floor. He watched his feet in the red boots, watched the hem of his cloak, and he let Theren push him forward, stop him, and he stood there.

"Closer," the Septarch said. It was the same rich easy voice, and it made the boy shudder, with a thrill that was either murderous or

terrified. He knew that voice. It had lived in his closet in their old house--

---and that was as much as he remembered.

He stepped closer, until he was stopped by a stone dais in front of his feet. He knew Oberon was only a few feet away from him, and that if he looked up...

"Look at me," Oberon said, reading his mind.

Leander did. It was the eyes, again, as black as space without stars, and he tried not to fall, this time, clenching his bound hands behind his back, under the cloak.

You look like exactly what you are, and I still keep looking. Like I want to figure it out, after a while, like one of those paintings of a waterfall flowing uphill where you can't quite put your finger on the trick.

The Septarch was sitting in an elaborate chair, studded with controls and monitors. He was dressed in black velvet robes, and a bruise the shape of a starburst marked the back of one languid hand. He raised that hand to his jawline, brushed the backs of his fingers there, as though deep in thought.

He studied the boy for a long time, taking in the vinyl, the paint.

Does he even know my name? What is he thinking?

Leander was shaking, but he refused to look away. Something was happening in his chest, deep in under his lungs. It felt like his insides were rearranging themselves, or struggling to press closer to his skin, closer to those eyes.

"They did exactly as I ordered," Oberon said to Theren, as though Leander wasn't there. "I am...very happy with this."

"We exist to serve you," Theren murmured, pretending to be pleased, but Oberon was looking at Leander again, his eyes heavy-lidded and venomous.

"Leander Schaiden," he said, almost to himself.

His name, in that voice. It was like a blow. It was sorcery.

"Tell me this...Leander....why did you tell me to wait?"

Leander was frozen, and he was afraid he wouldn't be able to speak at all.

"Because," he began, and realized he had no idea why he'd done it. Panic. "Because...I guess...I wasn't finished looking at you," he said, weakly.

So much for his marvelous brain.

The eyes were on him still, and they held him there, and he could not fall, even if he wanted to.

Great. He'll think you're being a smart-ass, and he'll probably splatter you all over this room, he thought, caught in vertigo.

Something flashed into the Septarch's eyes. Amusement? He raised his hand, covered his painted mouth for an instant. Then he nodded, slowly, as though he had reached some decision. "You have your wish," he said, quietly. "I will be the last thing you ever see, Leander."

He stood, so quickly Leander cringed and stepped back, but he only turned his back on the room, gestured at Theren over his shoulder. "Theren. Twenty-one hundred hours. Leave him like that, exactly like that."

The boy's blood crystallized. He pulled at the restraints as hard as he could, and he wanted to scream, but his lungs were empty.

He was an appointment.

An appointment for WHAT?

He would go absolutely insane unless someone explained it.

Theren's hand closed on his shoulder tightly enough to bruise. "Yes, Septarch."

"Theren."

Something in his voice made Leander look at him again. He was

staring at Theren, with a strange smile on his lips. It looked like...pleasure. Anticipation. Something, too, of cruelty.

"No," Theren whispered, pleading, and something passed through the air like a magnetic field, and his hand clenched on Leander's shoulder hard, and Theren closed his eyes and shuddered, and made a sound like he was in pain, and his body jerked from an invisible impact.

He relaxed, slowly, and bowed as if it hurt him to do it, and led Leander out.

Leander felt something unfamiliar, that he might have known as envy, if he had been just a little older. "What happened?" he asked, as soon as they were outside.

"He rewarded me," Theren said shortly, his voice ragged.

"I don't...how?"

"No one knows how he does it. He'll look at you like that, and you feel like...I don't want to talk about this," he snapped, and scrubbed at his mouth with the palm of his hand.

"Like telepathy?"

"I guess."

"No, Leander, it didn't, it's even worse than hurt, now for God's sake shut up about it," he said, almost pleading, and it was like his voice was right on the edge of a ravine, and Leander stopped asking.

"He won't kill you tonight," Camille said.

Leander was lying on his bed with one arm covering his eyes. He could still feel the restraints around his wrists, even though Theren had taken them off almost an hour ago. He turned over, propped himself up on his elbow. "What?"

"He won't kill you tonight," she said again, speaking slowly and loudly as if Leander were deaf. "He wouldn't have had them dress you if he wanted to kill you right away. This is where he puts the ones he wants to keep for a while."

Leander thought about that. He thought about Jyana. Mister, can you

open the door? "And the others?"

"If they're not here, they're probably already dead, or they will be, the first time he sees them. He separates us by quick or slow, but he kills us all eventually. No one ever leaves."

He bit his lip. "But you're still here."

"Not for long. I'm too old for him already. For a while, I had them shave me, here," she said, pressing her knuckles against her groin, "And that worked for a while, but...not for long."

Leander shuddered, disturbed. "Why?" he said, but she didn't answer. She just kept on, as though she were following a script.

"When I first came, there were two other kids here. They were brother and sister. The girl, Julia...she must have been just eight or nine...he fitted her."

Camille shook her head, refusing to elaborate. "She did something to make him angry...I don't know what. She was in that cell, the one across from you. He fitted her and had them bring her back here like that. It took her a week to die. She wasn't even screaming after a while. It sounded like a wolf, that noise she was making."

Leander didn't say anything. He couldn't have, even if he'd wanted to.

"It took them two more days to take the body away. I can still smell her," she added.

He deliberately did not sniff to see if he could still smell her, too. "You said there were two kids."

Something strange and savage crossed her face.

For an instant, he almost understood her.

Then, the potential was gone, and the schizophrenia descended across her face, like a veil, like an event no one at the party was willing to discuss. He got a flash of people pretending ignorance, disinterest, turning away smoothly into elegant and less dangerous conversations.

"The other one's name was Lucius. He was sixteen. He almost never picks anybody that old, but Lucius was...beautiful. Almost like you.

But he was evil."

"Evil how?" Leander wanted to know, but she ignored this.

"I don't know what happened to him. One night he just...never came back."

She was lying.

Leander's eyes were wide, but he tried to make his voice scornful. "I don't believe you," he said.

Camille shrugged. "He eats some of them. Or he'll take the ones he wants to keep a while, like us, into the throne room and make us watch him kill the other ones. Every one of us is dead already."

"So, if he isn't going to kill me tonight, what will he do?"

There was something evil in her voice when she answered. "Wait and see," she said.

He turned over, his back to her. He put his hands over his ears, but he still heard when she started to sing again.

unknown appetites

When Theren came to take him to the Septarch he wouldn't speak to the boy at all. He didn't restrain him this time. Leander wondered if that was a good sign or a bad one.

He led Leander up a seemingly endless flight of spiral stairs. He stopped outside the door, keyed it open, and gestured for the boy to go inside. "Should I kneel, or something?" Leander said, half-joking.

Theren was already leaving. "He'll let you know," he said over his shoulder.

Well. Leander stepped inside. The door closed behind him. Automatic.

The first room was absolutely medieval, complete with fireplace and thick tapestries. He knew better than to examine the pictures too

closely. He already had nightmares enough on his own. There was a table with two chairs, with places set for two people, and covered platters of food. The smell set his stomach to growling furiously.

He didn't see the Septarch. There was an archway to his right; he went towards it, and looked inside. A bedroom, with a vast iron bed. Another fireplace.

There was a statue, that seemed to be a man turning into a bird turning into an engine. The firelight did strange things to it, seeming to make it contort, its mouths gaping.

Curiosity drew him closer to it. It was dark blue metal, and he had never seen anything like it. His hand came up to touch it. He ran his fingertips along shiny metal teeth, a geometric feather, and a knotted conglomeration that might have been flesh or cable.

"Leander."

He jumped, snatched his hand away from the statue as though it had burned him.

The voice was behind him. He wanted to turn around, but he couldn't.

"Leander was the name of a boy who lived on Earth a very long time ago. He was in love with a priestess named Hero who lived on the opposite side of a river. Every night she would leave a torch in her window to guide him, and he would swim across the river to be with her."

The voice was closer, now. "They would make love, every night. It went on for almost a year."

"Until one night, when she didn't leave a torch. He tried to swim across anyway, and he drowned."

Oberon was right behind him, now, his voice very nearly in Leander's ear. "Don't place faith," he whispered. "It's almost always...fatal."

Leander did turn, then, and Oberon was so close he backed away, against the statue. The Septarch raised his hand--Leander gritted his teeth over a scream, but Oberon only reached over the boy's shoulder, and laid his hand on the statue, almost lovingly. "Do you like it?"

Leander swallowed hard. "It's...um...it's beautiful. Where did you get it?"

"I made it," Oberon said, tracing the agonized lines. His nails were long, and dark gray. They looked unnervingly...functional. He scratched them against the metal, lightly, and shuddered, his eyes drifting closed.

His fingernails.

Leander forced himself to look away from them. He spoke more to distract himself than anything else. "What does it...does it mean anything?"

Oberon looked at him, then, and he was falling again. "Change is almost never for the better," he whispered to the boy. And he inclined his head, towards the table.

Leander supposed that was an order.

He pulled out Leander's chair, and the boy stood there confused for an instant before he sat down, awkwardly, staring at his hands. Oberon didn't speak. He took the boy's plate and filled it with dripping pieces of pink meat and something that looked like tiny black marbles. Leander eyed it. "What is that?"

The Septarch raised his eyebrow, seeming to be amused at that, and set it in front of him. "Taste it, and if you like it, maybe I'll tell you."

Leander tried. Whatever it was rolled off his fork. He picked up his spoon instead, and put a tiny bit of the stuff on his tongue. The taste was dark, salty. He chewed, hesitantly, and decided he liked it. "It's good. Is it poisonous?"

Oberon smiled at that. Leander watched that, fascinated. He had never seen him smile. His lips were painted, like a woman's, full and curved, but hard at the corners. His teeth were perfectly straight and white, but very long. "It's caviar," he explained.

Whatever that was. Some kind of mushroom, maybe.

Leander started to take a bigger bite then set his spoon down. "Camille say you eat little kids," he said, all in a rush, before he could stop himself.

Oberon cut himself a bite of meat, lifted it to his mouth and chewed reflectively. "Does she?"

He cut another bite, stabbed it with his fork and held it out to Leander.

Leander stared at, then looked back at the Septarch, searching his face for any clues. Oberon's face was absolutely blank.

If he tells you to do something, you do it, no matter what it is, Theren said in his brain, softly.

Leander opened his mouth, took the meat from the fork with his teeth. He held it in his mouth as though it were a live spider. His stomach knotted, and his throat closed. He gagged, and he gritted his teeth and drew in a hard desperate breath, and forced himself to chew it.

It was the softest meat he'd ever had, and the taste made the caviar seem like synthetic protein cubes in comparison. He'd never tasted anything like it. It was quite possibly his new, favorite, food. Whatever it was.

He swallowed twice, and cut himself another bite from his own plate.

Oberon smiled as though he'd just learned a secret.

He lifted a black bottle, poured something green into two crystal glasses. "It's absinthe," he said, before the boy could ask.

Leander tasted it. It was sweet, but bitter, like licorice, and it did interesting things with the flavor of the meat.

He finished everything Oberon gave him, and the absinthe made him sleepy and dizzy. He drew his knees up to his chest, wrapped his arms around them, his feet in the chair. "What should I call you?"

"Don't you know my name?"

Leander nodded. "Theren said I should call you the Septarch."

Oberon thought about that. "That would be a little like me calling you the Slave."

Leander hugged his knees tighter. "If I'm your slave, what kind of, um, work will I be doing?"

"Say my name," the Septarch ordered him, so sharply that the boy flinched.

"Oberon," he whispered, and it did something to his insides, that same shifting that had happened in the throne room.

"No. Not like that."

"Oberon," he said again, more clearly, and he licked at his lips, tasting bitter and sweet.

"Come here."

Leander moaned, afraid he couldn't stand, but he managed it, and went to stand in front of the Septarch, his hand on the table to steady him.

The Septarch reached for him. The boy cringed, tears stinging in his scorched throat. If he touches me, I'll go crazy, he thought.

Oberon touched him for the first time, putting his hand on the boy's cheek. Leander made a soft sound, as though he might begin crying. Oberon moved his hand down to the boy's shoulder, and then grasped Leander and lifted him, and set him down on his knee.

Leander was rigid, shaking so hard his teeth were chattering. His eyes were tightly closed. Oberon leaned close, put his teeth against the boy's neck, licked at his skin with the tip of his tongue, bit him there hard enough to bruise. "This is the kind of work you'll be doing," he said, before he moved to the boy's mouth.

The boy's head fell back. His hands and his mouth opened, and he tasted caviar and wormwood.

"Say my name," he whispered, against the boy's lips.

"Oberon," Leander breathed, and leaned into his hands.

It was over, then, and those black eyes were on him, and Oberon set him back on his feet. "Go. The door's open, and Theren is waiting for you," he said, abruptly.

Leander opened his eyes. Then he realized what he'd heard, and

something broke in his chest, and his feet were carrying him to the door before he realized he'd moved.

The Septarch had turned away from him, and was staring into the fire.

Leander stopped in the doorway. "What does fitted mean?" he blurted out.

"Go."

What he heard in Oberon's voice, barely leashed, made his hands fumble frantically at the door, and he closed it too hard behind him.

Theren was sitting in the hallway, his back against the wall. He raised his head, and there were tired lines at the corners of his mouth. He tried to smile. It didn't work. "Are you all right?"

"No," said Leander. Then, he was crying again.

amychophilia

Oberon closed and locked the door to his office. He sat down, picked up the boy's journal.

Holiness.

What did that mean, to a fourteen-year-old boy? A boy who hadn't screamed, who had tried to kiss him back?

Fuck it, he thought.

He opened it and began to read.

The first page of the journal was emblazoned with the words: EXTREME SECRET. IF YOU READ THIS YOU ARE CURSED. IT'S VODOO. This was followed by a drawing of a little cartoon man with a look of extreme anguish on his face. Presumably he had been cursed. It was voodoo, of course.

Oberon smiled at that. He had never seen anything like this. It was like...looking into the boy's mind.

He turned the page.

March 18

Motherfuckers. Because of all that time I missed in counseling I have to do twice as much work as everybody else. The teacher called me stupid in front of everybody.

She's a goddamn bitch. Her cunt is probably sewn together.

Counseling? Oberon frowned. He kept up with current events closely enough to know what counseling would be like on Christian Earth. And it seemed that the boy had a violent streak. Nice.

March 2

Something bad happened. This other kid he

Something was scrawled out heavily here, the penstrokes deep enough to gouge into the paper. Oberon could make out two words: said...laughed.

...and then I hit him smash bang on the mouth. His lips sort of squished and there was blood squirting everywhere, and it hurt my hand so bad I thought I broke my fingers or something, but it was like I didn't care if it hurt. It was still happening, that thing that happens, and I could see but everything was flat and nothing was the right color. It was like I was up inside my head and my body was doing stuff all by itself. So he was crying and he didn't try to hit me back or anything. He covered his mouth up with his hand and I hit him again just to see if it would work. And I partly hit his hand and partly his nose. He was just bleeding fucking EVERYWHERE.

I wonder if maybe I'm possessed.

I used to think all that was crap that they say to scare you, until this started happening. Probably it is just crap and I'm just insane, because now that I think about it I don't feel guilty. It wasn't exactly a bad thing the only way I would have felt like it was a bad thing is if I'd gotten caught and I didn't. They would hold you down and let the other kid hit you back. So much for turning the other fucking cheek.

I keep thinking about it over and over and

March 22

I scribbled out some of that.

I should tear out the whole thing because if I ever become a serial killer and they find stuff like this I think you get in even more trouble.

I try to be scared and feel guilty and just NOT get like that, but sometimes this happy feeling just comes all over me like I just know something wonderful is gonna happen. But that has to do with the fury too. It's so bad

They'll find out what I'm like because they watch you all the time and I'm sure they can see it in my face.

March 24

I drew a picture about it and then burned it because maybe that way I can sort of get it out of my system. That's illegal too because it's practicing witchcraft. Stupid motherfuckers stupid rules about everything. It didn't even fucking work anyway.

I'm always wanting to look in the mirror all the time to see if I look crazy. It has to make me look different somehow.

It does, Oberon thought. But only other crazy people can see it.

March 30

Got another bootleg game for my computer. Can't write much because I'm busy playing it. It's about this French person who wrote all these sicko books about Sodom. The one they threw in prison and he lived there his whole life. The State would have me reconditioned--in prison for MY whole life if they even knew I have this game.

April 2

Made a copy of the de Sade game and traded it to this kid for an illegal audio disk. It's the first one I ever had I actually wanted to listen to and it took me twenty minutes to get my computer to play it. This was like music from I think about 2002. I never heard anything like it.

I love it and it's wonderful. It's like they feel like I felt when that thing happened. They were like furious because they could tell the Christians were taking over the place and they were like me and they knew what other people like them would be in for once THAT happened. But it happened anyway.

I looked it up, the history of that year. The Christians couldn't make any laws then! And they couldn't force anybody to be Christian. They just used a lot of propaganda to try and make you want to be, like that Hitler guy. I thought it had to be made up that they used to not own the whole system but now I know they never could have made music like that otherwise.

I wish I had lived then instead of now.

April 3

It happened again.

I was in my room this time. Way earlier this morning in school one of my teachers saw me reading this little thing on autopsies. We weren't even doing anything in the damn class and everybody else was pulling up junk too but she reached over me and turned my computer off and gave me one of those long hard mean looks. Like I'm scared of the bitch. That kid I took out was way bigger than her, and he was EXPECTING me to hit him.

But when it happened I was really pissed off, but not THAT pissed. I'm used to them getting in my business.

When I got home I was lying here on my bed listening to that disk and it was like an explosion I was SO mad. I was lying kind of curled up on my bed and I dug my fingernails into my thighs and the weirdest thing happened. I got hard. And I was scratching hard enough that I knew it SHOULD be hurting but it didn't. It felt like my whole skin was connected to my dick.

I scratched myself all over and I had all these marks. I wish my nails were longer. And I had to sneak a towel past my Mom to clean the come off the bed. It still left a mark even though I wet it and finally I just took off the whole sheet and turned it over. I know Mom wouldn't say anything about it but it's gross to know your mom knows you do that.

I had that disk playing the whole time.

I wish I had pictures of some of the singers. I try to imagine their faces, but I can't really. I guess they're like demons only beautiful. Like Lucifer. He used to be an angel so he has to be beautiful, only evil.

Maybe...maybe all of them left in a huge spaceship when they knew it were too late for Earth. Maybe they started their own colony and their great-great-great-grandkids are still there. I wonder what it would look like. I wish they would come and get me. Or they could all come

here and start a big war and millions of people would defect and join them and fight the State.

They probably wouldn't want me. I'm too little.

Yeah, but when THAT happens it's like I could give a shit how little I am. Or I could be a pilot or a computer technician. Or maybe an executioner. I wouldn't have to be all that big if they were, like, tied up or something.

He closed his eyes. He vaguely remembered being a boy, and he had read the legend of King Arthur. He had spent weeks searching in manmade woods for the sword in the stone.

Excalibur.

He would be the only one who would be able to pull it free. He would be the fulfillment of the prophecy of the once and future king, and he would lead the planet into a golden age. The fact that he had lived with his family in the Samar colony on Mars in a biosphere had conveniently escaped his young mind.

OH MY GOD do you know what I found?!!!

I was on the computer trying and trying to find any pictures of any of those singers. Well I found this Christian magazine from 1998 and it was all about how satanic and evil modern music is. (I guess it was modern then.) The text sucked. It sounded just like the same crap they tell you today. But guess what? It had PICTURES!!!

I printed them out and cut them out of the stupid text. I named the scary one Lucifer. The other one, the sort of feminine looking one, I named Samael because I think that's the name of another evil angel.

I stuck them in here to keep them safe because I always have this with me.

Oberon flipped through the pages. Most of them in the back were

blank. He turned the notebook upside down and shook it, gently. Two pieces of paper fluttered out.

He retrieved one of them from under his desk, flipped them both over and studied them intently.

He began to laugh, and he laughed so hard and for so long he ended up with his forehead on the edge of his desk, his lungs aching, his eyes streaming.

No wonder he told you to wait, he thought, gasping.

He ran them both through the scanner and saved a copy. He tucked them both carefully back into Leander's journal and flipped back to his place.

...Aren't they beautiful? And they let them wear paint or makeup or whatever. I mean, people probably made fun of them (from a safe distance) but they couldn't STOP them. Now nobody can wear it, not even girls, because it's illegal to try and look a way GOD didn't intend you to look. When whores wear it they can get arrested for lewd conduct.

But you know what else I was thinking? Pretty much everybody's face looks the same. It's all white and all the same shape. And they're kind of slow and stupid looking. It's because pretty much everybody is engineered because of the tax breaks and stuff you get. But me and my mom are natural and we don't look like that. (My dad sort of does but that's okay.)

Both me and my mom are short and bony and skinny, and she's The only other person I've ever seen with green eyes. Both of the singers are sort of--they don't look LIKE me, but they look like I might look when I'm older. How I'd like to look, anyway.

LATER--

I did that scratching thing again. I pretended it was them, though, Samael holding me down and Lucifer, the scary one, scratching me

really hard, all over. I pretended they said they would choke me to death if I screamed.

I never came like that before. I almost did scream.

What's wrong with me?!

I think I'm crazy. I have to be. I wish I could ask someone about it but I already know this isn't even fucking CLOSE to normal. The only thing worse than doing that at all is I guess doing it while thinking about a guy. TWO guys.

That has to be why I got so mad when that kid called me that. I guess I knew it was true.

What if it gets worse and I get so crazy I don't even know I'm crazy anymore? How would I even know what was going on?

April 8

I know I sort of got that idea from the de Sade virtual I was playing. The scratching, I mean.

In third period I realized if I had a lot more pictures of them I could scan them into the game. I'm afraid to though because you can burn paper but it's really hard to absolutely delete something so it can't be recovered. That only ever happens if it's something you really want to KEEP and you delete it accidentally.

April 12

I'm possessed.

I know I am. I'm going to hell and I'm not really all that upset about it because those singers are there and maybe I'll get to say hi. I think they were witches. I think I am one, too.

I cut myself with a piece of glass. On purpose. And I liked it. Sort of even loved it.

Somebody might find this. I should tear it up but I just don't want to.

It's MINE.

I don't think I'm going to write in this anymore.

The rest of the pages were blank.

How old would he have been? Twelve? Thirteen? Was it last year, or the year before?

It was exquisite, the thought of Leander in his room, alone, his hands on himself, guilty and frantic.

Caught by phantoms, who threatened to kill him unless he submitted. Fourteen, living in State-controlled Earth, with a desperate crush on two musicians who had died hundreds of years ago.

His fantasy. Helpless in the grip of evil--and not entirely unwilling to be there.

Oberon felt something in his chest unfold, spreading bright wings and glittering bright enough to blind him.

He did know. He knew what he was asking.

madness

Leander could hear Camille even before Theren opened the door to the Gallery. She was howling, and banging something into the bars.

Theren sighed. "Sometimes she...throws stuff. I'll go first.

He went inside, and Leander heard him saying something to Camille in an irritated voice. He caught echoes of it: if you don't want...and you stop...or I'll...he won't...

She stopped.

Theren gestured Leander inside, led him to his cell. He turned, walking quickly out of the Gallery. "You remember what I said," he

told Camille, before he closed the door and locked it.

Camille stood in the center of her cell, with the heels of her hands pressed into her temples. She glared at Leander, with so much hatred that the boy backed away from her. "Camille, I didn't-

Camille shrieked, and ran at the bars between them as hard as she could. She bounced off, her neck snapping backwards, and crumpled to the floor. She didn't move.

Leander watched her, wide-eyed. "Camille," he whispered, and he went over and put his foot through the bars to reach her, and poked her gently with the toe of his boot. She didn't even flinch.

He couldn't tell if she was breathing.

He went to his keypad. The red button.
If he didn't push it, she would probably die.
He hesitated a moment. He pushed it once. He sat on his bed, watching her.

She didn't move.

Theren came in almost immediately. "What is it?"

"It's Camille. She--"

"Shit," Theren snapped, seeing her on the floor. "What did you say to her?"

"Nothing," Leander protested.

Theren pulled a portacomm from his belt. "Well, what set her off, then?"

"How should I know? She's crazy." It felt like a lie as soon as he'd said it. He knew damn well what had set her off, but he wasn't going to try to explain it to Theren, even though it would only take two little words: she's jealous.

Theren rolled his eyes and spoke into the receiver. "Cayle. I need you in the Gallery, right now. It's Camille again," he said, clicked it off and keyed open Camille's cell.

Another man came in, much older than Theren, in the same violet uniform. He looked at Camille in disgust. "I can't carry her. You'll have to help me."

Theren lifted Camille in his arms. She hung limp, her hair covering her face. Neither of them spoke to Leander.

After they were gone the silence was thick, heavy. Leander was hot. He pulled off the red cloak, crumpled it, thought better of it and folded it at the foot of his bed. He couldn't manage the zipper behind his neck to get the vinyl bodysuit off. He struggled out of the boots. That was a little better.

He picked up the cloak, absently raised it to his face. He could smell Oberon there, dark and sweet, like incense and damp earth. He climbed into bed, still holding the cloak, tangling it around his legs.

He fell asleep with his face buried in it.

curiouser and curiouser

Oberon was typing something into a notepad. Theren waited, without speaking.

Finally, the Septarch said, "I want everything on the boy. All of his records--school, hospital, police--everything. And have them ship all of his things. Compensate whatever's left of his family. And get the genofile on the one that was killed. His mother, I think it was."

Theren was stunned. Oberon had never ordered anything even remotely like this. "Yes, Septarch," he said, just in time.

Oberon still didn't turn from the screen. He spoke again after a long pause, and his voice was strange. "Does he...does the boy require anything?"

Yes, you sick bastard. He requires that you hadn't made me murder his mom in front of his eyes. He fucking requires to go home and have a normal life. He requires that you never happened to him. "I believe he has everything he needs, my Lord."

"Ask him if he wants anything, then. Give him anything within reason," Oberon said, abruptly. "As soon as you have his things, bring them to me. Day or night. Unless he's here, of course."

"Of course," Theren said, his voice so dangerously close to being angry that Oberon did look at him, then.

He reached into his belt, to escape the Septarch's look. "You told me to bring you this, my Lord." It was a transparent computer disk. Oberon gestured, and Theren put it on the desk beside the notepad.

"That's all," Oberon said, waving him away.

Theren bowed. He left as quickly as he dared, and he let the door close itself. He was afraid he'd slam it hard enough to break the latch.

He heard Leander's voice. Why is this your life?

"I have no fucking idea," he whispered to himself, and hoped he wasn't being recorded.

bait

Leander was half asleep when Theren came for him.

"How's Camille?" he asked, swinging his feet out of the bed.

"She'll be back in a few hours," Theren said, then added, "She'll be all right." Then, his voice odd, he said, "The Septarch asked me if you require anything."

Leander thought about that. "Like what?"

"I don't know. He said 'anything within reason.'"

Anything within reason. Leander considered. He thought briefly of his things on Earth, his odd bits of colored glass and machinery and disks full of coding. No. All of that was beginning to seem like it belonged to someone he had known a long time ago. He had no use for any of it now. "Well...do you think it would be all right if...I mean, if I had

some paper, and something to draw with? Colored pencils? I mean, I know they're expensive--"

Theren laughed. "You'll get them. Any particular kind you like?"

Leander shrugged. "I never had my own before. I don't know."

"I'll bring you a couple of things, and you can try them out, and let me know which you like."

"He won't mind?"

Theren looked at him. You could ask him for a hovercraft, probably. You could ask him for all the tea in China. Don't you realize he's never given anyone anything before? "I'm sure he won't. Come on."

This time they dressed Leander in the same clothes, only in dark vivid blue, and they put him in gold paint. "He wants me back this soon?" he asked Theren, and the woman brushing paint on his mouth frowned at him and dabbed at a smudge with the ball of her thumb.

"Apparently," Theren said, vaguely.

"I thought he was mad at me."

"He might be. I guess we'll know soon enough."

justice

He brought Leander to a new room, this time, an office the color of a crypt with a vast black marble desk. Oberon was sitting behind it in a dark leather chair, the gleam of the computer screen flickering in his eyes. He was wearing dark red, a sleek suit of thick cloth, the insignia glittering at his throat, silver links gleaming at each wrist.

He stood, and indicated to Leander to sit in his chair. Leander obeyed him, clumsy, uncertain. Oberon stood behind him. "I have something for you."

The desk was an odd collage of console and art, with small steel sculptures, and a tiny glass jar with something in fluid that might

have been a pair of eyeballs. Leander kept his hands in his lap, afraid to touch anything. "Are you angry at me?" he asked. His voice was faint, and he was embarrassed the minute he spoke.

"No," Oberon said, sounding faintly surprised. He smiled a little, and said, "I've been watching this, over and over. I'm happy with the way it worked, and I wanted you to see it."

He reached over from behind Leander. His hair hung over the boy's shoulder. Leander closed his eyes, tried to edge away without being obvious. Oberon either ignored that or didn't notice it. He dropped a disc into the drive chute and selected play.

The screen went black, flashed a series of numbers, then a name. Dr. Edgar Nolan. A picture assembled itself from random points of color. Leander recognized him immediately. The man's face instantly made him feel sickly furious. "That's the doctor who--"

"I know," Oberon said, quietly. "Watch."

Another name. Jamison Curn. A photograph of the policeman who'd stunned him. Leander gritted his teeth. He'd found a mark from the stun gun later, two small circles on the left side of his chest, where the skin was dry and peeling. An electrical burn.

Then, a dim, silent video. It was the throne room. Oberon was in his seat on the platform, facing out into the room. He was wearing the formal robes, painted, tapping something on the armrest that looked like a miniature mace. Behind him, Leander saw himself projected onto a wide screen, set in the wall just above the throne. He was sitting naked on an examining table. The doctor and the policeman stepped into view.

"I don't want to see this," Leander muttered, embarrassed, looking at his fingernails.

Oberon's hand closed on the back of the boy's neck, under his hair. His fingers were so warm the boy gasped, startled. He felt trapped, suddenly. "This isn't to hurt you, Leander," he said, his fingers rubbing in gentle circles.

"Please--" Leander squirmed, a mess of questions and nerves.

"I want you to see it," he said, very close to Leander's face, the words

textured and intricate. "I did this for you."

Leander looked up at the screen again. Oberon's hand stayed on his neck, working at the muscles there. The boy could feel his shoulders relaxing. He wanted to lean his head back, but he had to watch.

The camera panned past Oberon, to the floor in front of his throne.

Both of them were held down, kneeling, arms restrained, mouths bound.

Dr. Edgar Nolan. Jamison Curn.

The doctor was crying.

Leander thought one of the guards might be Theren, but they all had their faceplates down, and he couldn't be sure.

The Oberon on the screen stood, and the projection of Leander struggling splattered across him. He said something, his lips moving silently, and gestured to someone off screen with the silver weapon. The camera turned to catch the prisoners being literally dragged out--they either couldn't or wouldn't walk.

The screen went to static, and then the picture returned again. They were outside, now, under the orange sky. A smooth circle had been cut into the rock, probably with lasers. There was a small group of spectators, dressed mostly in black, with masks against the wind and the dust. At least one was a woman, almost out of the edge of the camera's view, wearing vivid bright green.

They were holding them down, and a separate group of guards in black plate armor brought the stakes, each one carried by two men. And they started cutting--

Leander drew his knees up, rested his forehead on them, his eyes closed. He knew what kind of torture this was. He read every bloodthirsty thing he could get his hands on, but he'd never expected to actually witness anything like this. Real. This is real. He showed them that video to explain their crime--hurting me.

So what is he trying to explain to me?

He felt Oberon lean over him again, and then there was audio. The

sound was coming in clear and terribly loud through speakers mounted in the walls. The hiss of wind from the planet's surface. The screaming, metallic and frightfully close. And another sound, something wet and soft, ripping--

The pressure inside him was unbearable, so vast he could not imagine it. He couldn't take this. He would cry, or scream, or laugh, or run. Something. "Turn it off."

Oberon reached over him and switched it off. He rubbed his face against the boy's and said, "I thought...you would like it."

Leander's hands came up, closed hard in Oberon's jacket, and he tried to kiss him, passionate but clumsy. The Septarch almost pulled away, his hands clutching at the air. Then he held the boy's jaw, and kissed him back, hard and deep. Leander was kneeling up in the chair, now, and he wrapped his arms around Oberon and crushed him close, held him as tightly as he could. "You did that for me?"

Oberon pushed the boy's head back, and bit his neck, hard enough to mark him, but he kept the bite brief, and pressed a kiss to the bruise.

Leander was trying to explain it, trying to find words for the strange suffering he was suddenly feeling. "Nobody ever...cared if someone hurt me...nobody ever tried to get them back for me...."

"You were brought here for me. Everyone you dealt with from Earth until here was under my control, and they knew that you were mine. Nobody hurts you but me. Not ever again."

Leander made a strangled sound, pushing closer, but he said, "I don't want you to hurt me."

Leander made a strangled sound, pushing closer, but he said, "I don't want you to hurt me."

"No?" This was in an awful tone of voice, sweet enough to be a trap, amused enough to be lethal. Oberon's mouth was moving just over the flesh he'd bruised. "What do you want?"

"You're always biting me," Leander said. His eyes weren't working right. His hands came up, all by themselves, and he did what he'd wanted to do since seeing Oberon on Earth for the very first time, and buried his hands in all that terrible long hair.

“Answer me.”

“I want...to know why I'm here...I want to know what you want.”

“I want you here. That's why you're here. That's what I want.”

“That's not a very helpful answer,” Leander managed. He felt positively weird. His eyes still wouldn't work. He could see, but everything was blurry, and he just wanted to stay very still, and breathing was so traumatic, suddenly. He felt like he'd been either drugged, or poisoned.

“I think you've forgotten who's asking the questions.” Oberon paused, deliberately, and licked from Leander's collarbone up to his cheek. The boy only shuddered, and he was holding Oberon's hair too hard, almost pulling. “Here's a question for you, Leander Schaiden--do you still want to know what fitted means?”

Leander made a little frightened pleading cry, deep in his throat, and buried his face in Oberon's shoulder.

“I'm not going to do it to you. I just want to show you.”

Leander was still. He was hearing his own heartbeat, like something the size of a planet smashing into his ribcage from the inside.

It took her days to die.

He's testing me.

He nodded.

Oberon pulled him to his feet.

Leander had never walked beside the Septarch before. The top of his head barely came up to the middle of Oberon's chest. He had to move quickly to keep up, and he was trying to imitate Oberon without realizing it, trying to move to the same rhythm. None of it felt exactly real. It was like a dream, or like moving through a fever.

Oberon kept the boy's hand in his own, and led him to a door that opened into a pitch-black hallway. “I can see in here, but you can't. Stay right behind me. There's light up ahead.”

He pulled Leander in, and closed the door.

Leander couldn't move. He couldn't tell if his eyes were closed or open. It was a trap. The Septarch would kill him, here, and he would never see the light again.

"Leander," Oberon said. He drew the boy close, pressed another kiss to his mouth. "Just follow me. It's all right."

Of course it wasn't all right. It was dark, for one thing, and the corridor smelled...odd. The air was damp, and thick, and heavy, and it reminded him of the smell of soured dirt, or an animal struck by an electrocar.

He wanted to say something idiotic like carry me or let's go back or can't you just tell me about it? Instead, he pleaded, "Kiss me again," holding his hands out in the darkness, open, and the Septarch made a thick heavy noise and lifted him off his feet, driving his tongue deep enough to make the boy gag. "More," he whispered.

"You're stalling," Oberon told him, sounding more amused than angry. "Walk."

Oberon led him for what seemed like miles. It was so wet here that the air was sticky, and the floor sloped downhill. Oberon tugged sharply at the boy's hand. "It's here," he said.

Leander heard another key in a lock. Then there was strange red light, spilling out into the hallway, and he followed Oberon inside.

It was happening. That strange ragged joy that had to do with the Fury.

The overhead light was crimson and it illuminated something laid out on a table in the center of the small room. Leander thought it was another sculpture. He moved closer.

"It's iron. It weighs about sixty pounds," Oberon said, looking at it almost lovingly. "These braces completely immobilize every joint. The corset and these bands go across the ribs. It's impossible to take any but the shallowest of breaths, and you can tighten it, here, with these screws."

He picked up the headpiece, an adjustable iron band dripping with

tiny hooks mounted on springs, and a mouthpiece like a flat bit. He tapped something, and the mouthpiece snapped open. "It holds your mouth open, and the hooks pull back your lips and your eyelids. These barbs go down in your ears, and the collar can be tightened until it closes almost completely."

Leander shuddered. What am I thinking? Why don't I know what I'm thinking?

He dropped the headpiece. It clattered back onto the table, the mouthpiece gaping like a cry. He lifted the bottom half, unhooked it from the corset. "This was a chastity belt. Antique, from the Dark Ages, on Earth. I redesigned it."

Two iron phalluses jutted in, thicker than Leander's wrist. They were gleaming dully under stains of something that looked black in the red light. They were surrounded by tiny clamps on longer springs. "The anterior one is removable," he said, and unclamped it and held it in his hand. The boy could tell how heavy it was by the tension in Oberon's wrist. "There are other...accessories, but these are the ones I used last time."

He looked at Leander, his eyes cold. "Want to ask me again what fitted means?"

Leander was looking at the mouthpiece, still, hypnotized. "What did Julia do that made you do that to her?"

"I didn't. Didn't Camille tell you? Her brother did it. Lucius. I gave him a choice between himself or his sister. He chose her."

Leander was an only child. He tried to imagine having a sister. He supposed it would be someone vaguely annoying that you loved, but you wouldn't like until you were grown.

"Will it kill you?" he croaked.

"If it's tight enough, kept on long enough. You die of blood poisoning, asphyxiation, or dehydration, depending."

The boy was pale, the bloodcolored light tracing the edges of his bones. He swallowed hard. "Which one did Julia die of?"

Oberon reattached the phallus, considering. "Fear."

Theren was waiting for him. "Your lipstick is ruined," he said, shortly.

Leander was staring into space, numb. It felt like there was a bird in his chest, wings beating furiously against his ribcage. There was an unbearable, excruciating pressure, like he was struggling against something invisible. He wanted to grind himself against the wall of the corridor, or scream, or laugh. He wanted something, and he didn't know what.

"I'll have them fix it when we come for you and Camille," Theren was saying.

Sudden fury, malicious and dark, made him clench his teeth together. It was like he'd just been startled awake. "Camille? He sent for her?"

"He sent for you both. He wants you both in the throne room. He's staging an...amusement of some kind."

"Will you be there?"

Probably, God help me. "I don't know yet."

"Did he tell you what your rules are?" Camille asked, as soon as Theren had left them.

"Rules?"

"Yeah, like my rule is I can never put the palms of my hands flat against anything. Like this," she said, holding her hand a foot from the wall, like a mime. "I can't put my hand there like that. That's my rule. He wouldn't let Lucius say any words with the letter "e" in them. After he slipped up twice he just quit talking at all."

His brain was trying to calculate how to speak without using any "E's". No love, no hate, no please....but wait. He forced himself to ignore that. "What if you do it in your sleep?" Leander asked.

"I learned not to."

"But how would he know?"

"Oh, he knows," she said. "So what's yours?"

"I don't think I have any," he said. He saw the mouthpiece, again, felt iron hinges digging into the corners of his mouth, and turned away from her so quickly he almost stumbled. "What was Julia's rule?" he whispered.

She was quiet for a moment. "I don't know. Why?"

"Because...he showed it to me. That thing. The thing to be...fitted."

He turned back to look at her, but she wouldn't meet his eyes. "Oh," she said.

"What's wrong with him?" Leander asked, and the pain in his voice frightened him.

She did look at him then. He thought she was going to scream. "Wrong? Wrong?" She collapsed to her knees, covering her face. Leander thought she was sobbing at first, until he realized she was shrieking laughter. "There's nothing wrong with him, Leander. He's evil."

Is he? Then what am I?

He got so cold his fingers locked into claws, and he ran at the bars connecting their cells and grabbed them and shook them hard enough to hurt his wrists. "Don't say that!"

She peered at him through her fingers, and grinned viciously. "Evil. Evil," she taunted.

He slammed on the bars hard enough to make them clatter in their moorings. "Don't," he hissed at her.

"What's the matter, Leander?" she said, her voice dripping sweetness. "Did he kiss you? Did he fuck you? Do you fucking think you're in love?" she shouted, her voice harsh and ugly.

The cold crept up into his lungs, closed around his voice. He took his hands away from the bars and stood still and straight, staring at her.

He could see her, jaw forced open hard, head clamped, lips drawn back with hooks to expose the sleek pink meat of her gums. "I think he'd fit you if I asked him to."

Oh, that felt exquisite. It was as though his voice fit into his mouth for the very first time.

Her eyes got very wide, and the laughter was gone like someone had pulled a trapdoor open and dropped it through the floor.

He was quivering. He kept wanting to smile, and then he did.

It made her cringe. "Leander," she whispered. "Not you."

"You watch your mouth, Camille," he said, very softly. "He doesn't like you, and I don't think I do either."

small cruelties

Oberon stumbled into the hallway and closed the door. He was starving and empty and wanted darkness more than he ever had in his life.

The look on his face. He was itching to touch it. He didn't want to know what she died of. He wanted to know what felt like.

The Zoo was quiet. It usually was, at that time of night.

There was the long hallway, with the solid doors along one side. Cayle, the resident doctor, was dozing in the single chair. An electric notepad was resting forgotten on his knee, displaying a diagram of the occipital lobe.

"Cayle."

The doctor woke instantly. It was a necessary reflex in his line of work. "I thought you'd be here much later than this."

I would have been, but I... "Are any of them ready?"

"I gave Four a full dose half an hour ago--"

"No. Not Four." Even numbers were boys. "How's Seven?"

Cayle pushed up his glasses. Nearsightedness could have been engineered out of him long ago, or he could have worn implants, but he insisted on wearing glasses. Real ones. With glass in them.
"Seven...ah, I thought you wanted her kept for--"

"I'm not going that far. I just want to talk to her." What kind of conversation would that be? Said the spider to the fly...

His hands were shaking. He needed to fix. Cayle had assured him that was psychological, an illusion of an addiction that his body was incapable of forming. He'd offered to install a permanent implant that would release a steady dosage, or could be activated by a tiny keypad. Oberon had refused. He liked the romance of needles, the physical act of shooting up. He supposed it was the same kind of fetish that made Cayle cling to those eyeglasses.

"Should I dose her?"

"How long does it take to work?"

Cayle did calculations in his head. Body mass, blood sugar levels, how much he could use without risking unconsciousness... "About fifteen minutes. Maybe twenty."

Oberon nodded once.

Cayle reached under his chair for his kit. It was a clever little chemical of his own design. It relaxed the muscles without inducing sleep or dizziness, and it had absolutely no effect on perception of pain. Oberon knew. He had tried it on himself.

Cayle went into the seventh door down, and closed it behind him.

Silence.

Then a wail, that rose in pitch until it struck hysteria, and stopped.

Oberon leaned against the wall, and thought, she's run out of breath, and her throat closed on her. Any minute now she'll draw another breath and absolutely SCREAM.

She did.

He closed his eyes. Like clockwork. They did that until they were seven or eight. He was grinding his hips, friction against air.

Cayle stepped out again, wobbling an empty syringe between his thumb and forefinger. "Do you want this?"

Oberon waved it away. He had syringes. There was nothing special about that one. "Is the camera on?"

"Isn't it always?" Cayle said, his voice dry and vaguely amused.

He closed and locked the door behind him.

The room was nothing like the rest of the Sphere. No stone blocks, no torches. The walls were off-white, and the floor was carpeted. There were toys scattered underfoot, a child-size computer unit, and a bed with a fluffy white bedcover. The light was electric, set in the center of the ceiling. It could have been a child's bedroom anywhere on Earth.

The girl was sitting on the bed, her face streaked with tears, sulking at a bandage on her thigh. She was dressed in the standard silk, a pale blue dress with no sleeves. She looked up at him, and he could tell she was afraid.

He sat down on the floor in front of her. "Did that mean man do that to you?" he asked, looking at her bandage.

She nodded. Her face twisted, as if she were considering bursting into tears again, but she sniffled and looked particularly dejected instead. Oh, she was lovely. White blonde hair, that cornsilk that never lasted past nine or so. Huge gray eyes, puffy now from crying, and she was tiny. Tiny.

Oberon sighed dramatically and showed her the permanent bruise in the crook of his elbow. "Me too."

There was a spark of interest. Little savages, all of them. "Did it hurt?"

He nodded gravely.

"Did you cry?"

"Yes. I did. I think I cried for a whole hour."

She thought about that. "Did your mom kiss it for you?"

"No. My mom is real far away. Nobody kissed it for me."

She hesitated, but she took the bait and slid off the bed, her skirt inching up. She leaned over his arm and pressed a tiny kiss to the bruise. Her lips were warm from crying, loose and damp, and he felt the motion of the muscles pulling them tight for the kiss all the way up his arm into his chest.

"Is it better?" she asked him, timidly. She put her finger in her mouth, sucking absently.

His teeth nearly went through his lip. "It's much better. Thank you very much. Did anybody kiss yours?"

She shook her head no. He leaned over and pressed a kiss over the little plastic bandage. She smelled like milk, and honey, and little kid sweat, and his tongue filled his entire mouth in fury at being closed up behind his teeth.

"You have pretty hair," she observed. He supposed he did. It was coal black and straight as rain, almost down to his waist. "But your eyes are scary."

"He did that, too," he said, pointing at the door. It wasn't quite a lie.

"I want my mom."

"Is your mom pretty?" he asked. She nodded. "I bet she would kiss you whenever you got hurt."

She nodded again. Suspected nothing.

"Did she ever give you special kisses?"

She didn't understand that. She wasn't supposed to, of course. She stared at him, and shrugged. Her eyes left him, went to the ceiling, the floor.

"Well, she must have. If she really loved you she probably gave them to you all the time."

She mumbled something. He took her wrist, gently, and tugged her finger out of her mouth. There was a string of saliva from her lower lip to her fingertip. He ached to taste it. Her bones were like air, like the bones of an exotic bird. "What did you say, sweetheart?"

"She only gave me one kind of kiss."

"What kind?"

She fell for that, too. "Like this," she said, and kissed him closelipped on his cheek. Her mouth was wet from her persistent chewing of her fingers. He inhaled deeply. Her hair brushed his face like cobwebs, and it hurt him, like the slash of a whip.

He gritted his teeth. Not yet.

"That's the only kind of kiss she gave you?"

She nodded again, still blissfully ignorant.

He buried his face in his hands, and did not move. He sat that way until he felt her hands in his hair, tiny little sticky fingers, tugging on the ends of it. This time the sensation went straight down, into his groin, and he drew up his knees. He hadn't fixed on purpose. It made him vicious, the hunger. Craving. Appetite.

"What's the matter? Are you crying, Scary Eyes?"

He didn't move. She tugged harder.

"It makes me sad. That's all. She never gave you any kisses except like that?"

"No. Just like that."

"Ah, then, she must not have really loved you. Not at all. Because a special kiss, that's a kind of kiss you have to give someone if you love them."

"But maybe I don't remember. What's it like?"

He stared at her, made his face skeptical and arrogant. "I don't know...maybe you're too little."

She stomped her foot. Actually stomped her little foot, and that was so delicious he shuddered all over. They were so transparent. "I am not too little!"

"Well, if I show you..." He sighed, forced every molecule in his body to pretend reluctance.

"Yes! Yes you better. Show me!" she demanded.

He cupped her tiny head in his hands, so little. There was so much space between her skull and his fingers. He kissed her, lips closed, slow and wet and careful, and then he licked at her tiny tight lips and drove his tongue in. Her mouth tasted of tears and heat, and she tried to pull away, startled, but he held her still, licked at the roof of her mouth, at the tiny smooth pearl teeth, soft and young and innocent.

He made his kiss so deep that she twisted in his hands, whimpering, and then he stopped, breathing against her face, and asked, "Did she kiss you like that?"

"No." Her fingers were seeking her mouth again, and he pushed her hand away, jealous of the attention.

"It makes me sad. She should have loved you."

"It tastes...funny."

He kissed her again, sucking hard at her tongue, and she mimicked him and drove him to fury, and he tore his mouth away from hers, laid his forehead against the elegant hot paper-mache of her shoulder. "Did she at least give you a special hug?"

"I don't know." She was frightened now, but not terribly so, and she was burning with curiosity under his hands.

"Want me to show you?"

She nodded.

That was the end of it.

"You have to take your clothes off," he told her, his breathing hard and thick and heavy. He tugged at the hem of the sky-blue silk dress, his fingers grazing the bandage, moving above it to the electric satin of her skin.

The screaming began.

The cries were high-pitched, frantic and terrified, and they suddenly reached a crescendo, the sharp bright desperate edge that only meant pain.

Cayle reached into the front pocket of his shirt. He extracted a small plastic case, snapped it open, and took out two little cylinders of foam rubber.

He rolled them up small, and inserted them in his ears. He could still hear it perfectly, only slightly muffled, but it was the thought that counted.

He settled into his chair, his fingers performing an intricate ballet across the keys of his notepad. He pulled up an analysis of the psychological effects of the use of biological weapons in the Second American Civil War, and read the same line, over and over again.

After a long while it seemed to be over, and he loosened the plug in his right ear and listened. No. There was low, hopeless, agonized silence, and the dark rumble of Oberon's voice, merciless and vicious.

Then a choking, gagging cough, and then absolute silence. Then a groan. And another. Then rhythmic, low, malicious gasps, and a sound like sobbing, and what might have been the sound of a blow, twice, and then a frenzy of them, loud and sudden, and a pleading shriek that was quickly interrupted.

He replaced the earplug, pushed at it hard with his fingertip.

Life in the Sphere. He supposed it was preferable to death in the Sphere.

He returned to his text. In the second civil war, political tension and differences in religious opinion led to the unleashing of....In the second civil war, political tension...

There was a loud crash in the room behind him.

He drew in a long, steady breath, and forced himself to read the second line. ...chemical and biological weapons, the impact of which...

Hear no evil.

He thought of another Cayle, one who had not had a number after his name, who had said something hundreds of years ago.

First, do no harm.

Almost an hour passed before Oberon came out into the hall again. He was stumbling, his eyes half-closed. There was blood on his chin. He was shirtless, and there was something dark smeared on his black pants. His chest was more scar than skin. Cayle had repeatedly offered cosmetic surgery for that. The last time he'd suggested it Oberon had broken his jaw.

He took Cayle's kit from him, rummaged through it until he found what he needed. He struggled with the tourniquet until Cayle pushed his hands away and did it for him. Oberon's eyes rolled back when he pushed the plunger in. He pulled it out, dropped it.

"I need you to go over the implants for me. Full diagnostic. Something is wrong," he told Cayle, rubbing at the puncture mark with his fingertips.

"Really. And what seems to be wrong?"

"There are...inappropriate chemical reactions to certain...stimuli."

"What stimuli?"

"Stimuli related to...the boy. The new one. Leander."

"Oh," Cayle said, with no idea what Oberon was talking about. "Did you want me to look you over tonight?"

"No," Oberon mumbled. "Not tonight." He turned, moving slowly past the doctor. "The stills. Print them out and bring them to me. Tomorrow. I'm going downstairs," he said, ricocheting off the wall towards the door.

Downstairs was his euphemism for the Crypt.

Cayle watched him leave, sighed, and went in to see to Seven.

memory cage

Forget about the boy.

"I can't," he said, to that cold, logical voice. "I can't, I want to, but he's inside me."

It was like that. The appetite. It would start like a small private panic tucked under his ribcage, and it would pulse there, waiting, mocking him, and the drugs only made it worse.

Then there would be pulling, and everything would crack and bleach and peel, and behind it all he would see himself looking back. Words became unintelligible, and there was only a vicious damp world, a maze of wet glistening eyes, curious mouths, preying fingers. It would take him apart if he let it. He would be broken down small again, made young helpless flesh. Not the Septarch. Not anymore. Only a boy who had never said wait, not at all.

The crypt. Yes. He was trying to go to the crypt. It might be better, there.

It began, that dry droning voice in his head, the same one that gave him calculating, heartless advice. Welcome to the Sphere of Light and Shadow. Not one of you will survive this.

"One did," Oberon said, hoarsely. Then, hissing, "Let's just look at you and we'll see who didn't survive."

The crypt was dark and silent and filthy. It was empty except for the body on the wall.

It still wore the robes, now rotted, indistinguishable in places from the matter that had once been flesh. The insignia on the chest was reduced to a bristling mess of silver thread. The head hung back, awkward and broken, the hair gone, the skull almost colorless, like the belly of a snake. The stakes through the wrists and the hands were crumbling. He kept waiting to come in and find it fallen, collapsed on

the floor in a broken heap, or better yet, hanging lopsided and crazy from one wrist, one ankle.

Oberon stared at it, his hands knotted in his hair, pressing hard into his temples. This was his monument to his own murderous nature, his proof that he had become the greatest predator of all. Usually, this place made him icy, and electric with triumph. Tonight, he didn't feel much of anything.

He reached up with one hand, slowly, and felt in the tangle of peeling flesh and mildewed bone. His fingernails tore through ancient muscle like paper, and he hooked his fingers through the loop of the pelvic bone and pulled, hard, but the corpse didn't fall.

He thought about that, took his hand away and put his fingers in his mouth, as if to soothe an unknown pain.

Then, he screamed, and struck out, and his hand smashed through ribcage and spine and struck the wall behind it. He pulled out a delicate crumbling handful of what was probably once lung tissue.

He rubbed it between his fingers, into dust, and looked away from the corpse abruptly.

He wandered in a distracted aimless circle, then sat down, not quite Indian-style, with his legs crossed at the ankles and his arms wrapped loosely around his knees.

"Do you want to hear a story?" he asked the corpse. There was no refusal, so apparently it did.

He watched it awhile, to make sure it was listening. Then he leaned forward, rage twisting his face, and shouted, banging his fist on the floor for emphasis, "ONCE...UPON...A TIME--"

He cut himself off, drew a deep breath, leaned back again. He was calmer now, or at least holding it in better.

"Once upon a time there was a man named Acharis."

"He was a genius, and he did a great favor for an alien race known as the Makers."

He waited for questions. Apparently, there weren't any.

"They were so grateful that they made him immortal, and gave him a planet called Omega. It was a paradise. He lived in a place called the Sphere of Light and Shadow. People came from all over to live in his kingdom. He took the title Septarch, and he ruled over them all."

Still no questions.

"The Makers didn't know he was insane."

Oberon stopped, covered his face for an instant. The laughter would hurt if it came, and he choked it back until the spasm passed. He raised his head. "So the Septarch bought himself some children. Thirty of them. Three groups of ten."

"The first one, it was pure pain. The second, purely sexual. The third one...it was everything. Machines. Games. Chemicals. Electricity. Surgery. Starvation. Animals--"

He flinched, and the laughter happened in a sickening burst like vomiting, that was both agony and relief. He held his chest, eyes streaming, and let it move in him, through him.

"After every session he would sit the kid down and interview him. Fucking interview him. What was it like? How did it feel? What were you thinking? DID YOU LIKE IT?"

He stopped again, panting through bared teeth. "And they answered. They had to."

"There was a kid in the third group. His name was Oberon."

"After a while, his answer was yes."

"The Makers found out, but it was too late. They came back, by then Oberon was the only one left alive."

"So they asked him. What can we do to make this up to you?"

"And he said, Make me immortal. Make me the Septarch, and give him to me."

"And so they did. They took what they had given Acharis, and they gave it to Oberon." These words were like a mantra, a fragment of

verse repeated so often that all sense was gone, and only pattern remained.

He stood up, looking keenly into Acharis's empty eye sockets. "He was young. He thought he knew pain, but he didn't. Now, he's had two hundred years to learn."

"He wasn't going to make the same mistake Acharis did. He killed the Makers. All of them. And he killed every living thing on Omega 7-18. Living there, in their paradise. Living there, while I was up here being---"

The Septarch stopped. There was no word for that, for what had been done. Nothing even close, except maybe atrocity.

He choked out, "Do you know what my mistake was? It was letting them make you mortal again. I should have kept you immortal. I should have kept you to see what you might begin to like."

Well?? Is there more? I'm quite enthralled with this alternate world you've shown us, and want more.

However, I don't think religion will really take over like that. It's kind of something people innately fight against. Not that that part matters this deep into the story. Not anymore.

amusements

They came in, and began to paint more gold onto the boy's lips. Two women in formless gray robes went into Camille's cell to dress her.

"No," Leander said, catching the woman's hand with the makeup brush.

"Leander--" Theren began, sighing.

"You said I could ask for anything within reason. I don't want gold. Black and red."

The woman looked at Theren. "Only the Septarch wears—"

"Either do it the way I want it, or I'll squirm so much you won't be able to do any paint at all. And he'll be furious," Leander warned.

Theren studied Leander, and nodded. Leander watched until he saw the brush dipped into crimson, and leaned his head back, satisfied.

They were holding Leander's head still, and he caught a glimpse of Camille's back. Her skin was pale as milk, etched with a deep pink latticework of thick scars. She saw him looking and turned her face away, her lips a thin, hard line.

Leander looked up at the ceiling, his mouth suddenly dry. "I want a mirror," he said, and the woman gave him one. He studied his reflection, whispered, "Yes," and gave it back to her.

Theren was waiting, his face set in a mask of straight lines, "Cross your arms behind your back," he told Leander. Leander tried, and he couldn't figure out how exactly to manage it. Theren spun him around and arranged his hands, smoothed Leander's blue cloak over his back, along his shoulders. "Remember to look down, and keep quiet. He's usually in a fury when he arranges this kind of thing," Theren warned. "So whatever he's been letting you get away with, don't try it tonight."

The corridors were more crowded than Leander had ever seen them. There were guards in black and violet, and other people in clothes that looked like they had been designed for a funeral in space. He tried not to look up, but he could feel the eyes on him, and he would have sworn that there were whispers with his name in them when he passed.

The throne room was blazing with light. So many torches had been fixed to the walls that it dazzled Leander.

They stopped him just inside the door, and dragged Camille past him. She wouldn't even pick up her feet. God, please let me not act like that, he thought.

He looked up through his hair, keeping his head down. He saw them push Camille down on her knees, in front of the throne, and snap a gold collar around her neck.

These barbs go down in your ears, and the collar can be tightened until it closes almost completely.

He couldn't. He couldn't possibly let them put anything around his neck. He'd choke, or scream, or probably faint.

Leander stopped, rigid, but they pushed him forward. He raised his head then, searching frantically for Oberon.

The Septarch was on his throne, dressed in the formal black velvet robes, with his looped cross insignia embroidered on the chest in silver. He saw Leander looking and shook his head, frowning. Leander dropped his eyes again, terrified, but he heard Oberon say, "No. Just her. I want the boy up here."

He stumbled up the steps to the throne. Then he was there, and Oberon was as tall sitting down as the boy was standing.

The guards were falling into position on either side of the throne. There was a general commotion of people filing into the room, lining up around the walls.

Oberon leaned close to Leander, whispered so that only the boy could hear him. "You look terrified. And the paint is exquisite. I thought I told them gold."

"I wanted it this way." Leander whispered, and was instantly sorry he had. He cringed, expecting God knew what. At least you didn't say "like yours."

"The color of desire, the color of despair?" Oberon murmured to him, sounding almost amused.

"Les Misérables," Leander said back.

Oberon gave him a delighted look at that.

"What are we doing?"

"Look," Oberon said, gesturing over the boy's shoulder at a woman in a crimson dress. She had a glittering mask on a beribboned stick covering her face.

She saw Oberon looking at her, and dropped the mask, and made a beautiful gesture that brought her almost to her knees. Her lips were painted deep blue, and were laced closed with neat even stitches of silver wire. A transparent tube ran up her nose, the other end of it looped artfully around her neck.

"That's Victoria. She eats through that. She has to put the lipstick on with a tiny brush," Oberon told him.

"Did you ask her to do that?"

"No. That was all her own idea."

"Who are they?"

He raised his eyebrow at Leander, grinning at the expression on the boy's face. "My court."

"Are they slaves?"

"No." Did he sound, almost...startled at that? "They're my...they're refugees, from Earth, and places like it. You might meet some of them soon." He glanced at Camille, who had her hands covering her collar and was giving both of them a vicious, murderous stare. "Excuse me, Leander," the Septarch said.

He leaned over and grasped Camille's chin hard in his fingers. "Don't," he warned her, softly, looking intently at her until she closed her eyes.

He struck her across the face with the flat of his hand, hard enough to make her stumble, the chain catching. She turned away from him, her mouth bleeding, and the stitches in her forehead livid.

Leander watched, feeling oddly victorious.

He spoke to Leander again. "Will you sit up here with me, or should I

have them bring a chair for you?"

Leander was stunned by the transformation. He was being...charming. They might have been having a conversation at a school dance. "With you?"

"Like you did in my room," the Septarch added, and Leander blushed. He wanted to, but he had to struggle to uncross his arms, and then he didn't know where to put his hands.

Oberon pulled him close, turned him around and arranged him in his lap, with the boy's back tight against his chest, and wrapped his arms around him. He was holding him, casually, and it was more comfortable than Leander liked to admit. "Why me and not Camille?"

"We both know how I feel about Camille," Oberon said, loud enough for her to hear him, his voice thin with disdain. He put his hand high on the boy's leg and closed his fingers hard. "Hush. They're about to start."

The torches went out, all of them at once. An artificial light came on in the center of the ceiling, leaving a circle just in front of the throne that was illuminated, with the rest of the room in darkness.

Six guards marched in, double file. They were wearing the standard plate armor, but it wasn't violet. It was executioner black, with the full faceplates like gleaming chitinous hoods.

The two center guards were carrying someone tiny, each only using a single hand to lift her.

Leander caught a flash of white-blond hair.

He stiffened, knotting his hands closed, and struggled. There was a dim vision in his mind, of tearing himself free, going to her, catching her up in his arms and carrying her away.

Where're we going?

To Hell, in a handbasket, and guess what? The most beautiful motherfucker you've ever seen is they're waiting for us. He has eyes like ink and he's going to...

Oberon's arms were pinning his, and he closed his knees around the

boy's legs so Leander couldn't move.

These, here, and the braces completely immobilize every joint, whispered the voice in his head, dark, casual.

Oh, God, help me. I didn't know, I didn't know what I was asking...

"Stop it," Oberon whispered to Leander. The boy looked at Camille. She was sitting cross-legged on the floor. The gold chain from her collar was draped over her shoulder. She was staring off into space, a bruise darkening on her colorless cheek.

"Let go of me," Leander said, pleading.

"Leander," Oberon warned, his voice silky and dangerous, "I would much rather do this to her than you, dearest."

"You're testing me," Leander said.

"Yes. And you're failing."

The boy was still. His eyes stung, and the place on his neck where Oberon had bitten him ached, suddenly.

Jyana's guards set her on the floor and backed away, forming a semicircle around the throne. Oberon and Leander had a perfect view of the center of the stage.

Jyana lay on the floor, not moving. Her hands and her feet were bound, her face streaked with dirt and tears.

The guards were bringing something else to the middle of the circle; a large wire cage. It took four of them to carry it, one of them struggling at each corner. Leander could see something moving in it, something dark, and he caught a glimpse of pale fingers with long ragged stained claws, clinging to the wire.

Camille sucked in her breath, standing straight and drawn tight, and screamed.

Oberon shifted his grip on Leander, leaned over and struck her again, this time with his fist. She fell onto her side like a broken doll, and lay there, sobbing and screaming whenever she found the breath. He moved his hands back to Leander again. The boy cringed, half-

expecting to be hit himself, but Oberon only touched his back, his hair, his attention on his amusement again.

The guards swung open the door of the cage. Whatever it was cringed back, away from the light. One of the guards banged on the cage with his armored hand. He turned his face towards the throne, and Leander was sure it was Theren.

The thing growled and snapped at the guard's hand, and crept forward, sniffed the air from behind a thick mat of dark hair.

"What is it?" Leander breathed, clinging tight to the Septarch's hands.

"It's a geek," Oberon told him, grinning.

"It's Lucius," Camille cried, her voice a shred.

Lucius crawled out of the cage, crouched on his hands and knees, sniffing. He was dressed in ragged scraps of pale leather, and an iron collar with a heavy chain was around his neck. He wobbled on all fours, then straightened, very slowly.

"That's Julia's skin," Oberon whispered to Leander.

"What?" Leander whispered back, stunned.

"What he's wearing. Julia's skin."

Leander shook his head. That was beyond comprehension.

Lucius stood shakily upright. He was thin as a whip, and the lines of his face under the mess of hair might once have been beautiful. He looked up at Oberon, raised one hand and pointed at him with a jagged fingernail. He bared a mouthful of teeth, filed to sharp points and caked with gore, and snarled at the Septarch.

Then, he dropped back down onto his hands and knees. He scampered over to Camille, sniffed at her stitches, her bleeding face, and her crotch. He made a terrible keening sound at her, and tried to flee back into his cage. The guards had already closed and latched the door.

Leander pushed himself back, hard against Oberon's chest, struggling uselessly with his pinned feet. Oberon sighed in his ear, nipped at him. "Beautiful," he murmured again.

"What have you done to him?" Camille was screaming at Oberon. She rushed at him, and the collar caught again and dragged her back to the floor.

Oberon laughed. He put his mouth on the boy's neck and bit him hard, just behind his ear. It went all through him like electricity, and he thought, What if he hit me? What would that feel like?

"She's just angry because she thought she was in love with him, didn't you, Camille? She came to me one night, still wet from him. The next day I caught them both, out in the Garden."

"Is that why you don't like her?" Leander whispered.

Oberon thought about that, bit him again reflectively. "No. I never liked her."

He never liked her. He doesn't like her. You're the one in his lap, Leander, the voice said, sly and canny. Who's the pet now?

Oberon looked at the guards. "Show him the girl," he ordered.

One of them caught the chain at Lucius' neck and dragged him over to Jyana. She didn't move. Her eyes were glazed. She was either drugged, or mad, or both.

Lucius sniffed at her. He began rocking back and forth, frantically, panting, then he threw back his head and howled.

"She smells like me, probably," Oberon told him, his fingers lingering on Leander's collarbone.

"What did you do to her?"

Oberon only smiled.

The guards stepped back, giving him room. Theren had his faceplate turned to the floor.

Lucius stared at Jyana, shoved at her with one clawed hand. He hissed at her between clenched teeth, leaning over her. A clear string of drool dripped through his teeth, left a dark wet circle on her tattered blue dress

Then, he lunged forward as quickly as a striking snake.

Oberon pulled Leander tighter against him. "Watch."

Lucius buried his face in the girl's stomach.

Leander's breath was sticking in his throat, heavy and frantic. Oberon was hard, under him, and that meant something terribly important, but he couldn't think about it. His mouth was wet and he couldn't think about anything.

Jyana made a thin, wailing cry. It was drowned out by a louder sound, a thick wet ripping squish.

"I taught him how to do that," Oberon whispered to Leander. "Once you're hungry enough, you'll eat anything."

The girl jerked, caught in a seizure of pain. Her hands twitched in the air. One of them fell against Lucius, grasped weakly at his hair, then went limp.

Lucius shoved his hands into the hole he'd made, pulled out a thick clot of meat.

...virgin reams of color, hidden by skin from all eyes for a lifetime, suddenly in his sight...

Leander made a low, anguished sound.

He had expected a neat rainbow, like the anatomical diagrams in his schoolbooks.

...to see if there were new colors underneath, some bright fascination lying wasted under his blank skin...if he knew that geography maybe he could read...

Human organs weren't like that at all. There was no rainbow. It was a wet pulsing mass, and the only colors were shades of red.

Leander's stomach twisted hard. He thought he was going to be sick. He took a deep breath...and realized that what he was feeling wasn't nausea at all.

It was hunger.

He turned his head into Oberon's hand, and bit the base of his thumb, hard. Oberon made a quick startled sound, then smiled, and bent his wrist so that Leander could bite harder.

Lucius ate until Jyana was a limp package of skin and bone and hair. He stopped, without warning, leaned up, over her, and stared down at what was left as if he had never seen it before in his life. Then, he curled on his side like a fetus, eyes closed, keening, his hands and teeth smeared thick and crimson.

Camille was lying the same way, making a rhythmic groan that might have been of passion or agony.

Oberon watched her, and pressed a kiss to Leander's cheek. "Get up for just a minute, dearest," he murmured.

Leander tried. He sank to his knees, his eyes nailed to what was left of Jyana, and his hand came up and trailed along Oberon's thigh.

"That's beautiful," the Septarch said, and ran his nails through Leander's hair, before he stood. "Bring him up here," he said, speaking to the guards, but looking at Camille.

One of them took the chain, pulled at Lucius. He wouldn't move, and the guard had to reach under his arms and drag him.

Lucius lay where he was dropped, his eyes wide open.

Oberon reached for Camille. She screamed, trying to twist away, but he had her hair knotted in his hand, and he grasped both her wrists and twisted her arms behind her back, and dragged her over to Lucius, and shoved her on top of him. "Kiss him," he ordered her, pushing her head down. "Don't you love him?"

Lucius bared his teeth at her, still streaked with blood and clotted with strings of tissue.

Camille screamed again, her voice metallic and frantic. Oberon yanked her hands up to the middle of her back. Something snapped in one of her shoulders, and this time her cry was pure pain. "Kiss him, or I'll break them off."

Sobbing, she leaned down to kiss him.

Lucius bit through her bottom lip.

Oberon looked back, over his shoulder at Leander. "Should I let him fuck her?"

Leander tried to swallow, and nearly choked. He looked at Jyana's corpse, lying still in a spreading pool of fluid.

His mouth shaped the word yes.

"Leander--" she screamed, frantic at this betrayal.

He thought, do you fucking think you're in love? and he made a strange gesture at her, like a shrug.

The Septarch gave him a slow grin, wicked and triumphant, and he turned to the guards. "Let him have Camille. Don't let him kill her, though."

He let her go, gave her into the guards' waiting hands. He went back to Leander, picked the boy up and settled him on his lap again, and whispered, "That was the only right answer."

Leander groped for Oberon's hand again. He put his teeth back in the marks he'd made, and watched, without a sound.

He was mesmerized.

Virtual games, underground comics, banned books—nothing had ever told him about that noise, or the blinding surreal quality it had to watch carnage in front of you, or the smell, the thick coppery warm smell.

Oberon pushed two fingers into his mouth, gagging him, and he sucked on them, choking, and thought, Now I really am home.

They carried Camille out.

Lucius crawled back to his cage, dragging what was left of Jyana with him. He rattled the door and howled until they opened it for him, and

scrambled inside, pulling her inside too. They carried him out, too, and there was a splattering of applause.

Oberon pushed at Leander until the boy stood up. "Put your hands back behind you. Don't look up, and don't say a word," he said, his voice like ice, his eyes empty.

Oh, God, for him to yell at me like that.

He was trying to impress me. Prove something to me. He's determined to take me apart and see how I work. That's what he was doing to me. That entire...thing was engineered and scripted and acted out for my benefit. To see how I would react. If I would react.

He said that was the only right answer.

And just how do you think you did react, Leander?

It was too fast. It all happened too fast.

It was over too quickly.

He didn't like that.

What did he figure out about me?

Leander turned without meaning to and looked at the Septarch. He found that Oberon was looking at him already, staring at him with something in his eyes that was fierce and hungry and so cruel that Leander looked back at the ground, quickly, shaken.

"That's not what I told you to do. Is it?"

Oh, God. No. Not that voice. Not like that.

Leander could feel the blood rushing into his face, and he was so cold, so cold.

"Is it?"

The shove took him completely by surprise. He almost fell, and his ankle made an awful noise and the pain went through it like a burn.

"Answer me."

"No--"

Oberon pushed him again, his hand coming hard against the middle of Leander's back. The guards were carefully looking at anything but them. "Weren't you finished looking at me, Leander?" he said. The voice was dangerous now. Oberon was in another place, a place like hell.

If I looked back, he'd be laughing.

And he would hit me.

Leander's hands almost moved from behind his back.

He tried to will the fury to come, but it didn't. He was only alone, and terrified, and outnumbered.

He remembered the bolts in his mother, detonating, and he thought, This isn't a game. It never has been. And he kept his hands behind him.

But it was a game. That truth compass in his chest knew it was.

He just walked.

He didn't think, and he wasn't sure he was breathing. Oberon's hand was on the back of his neck, and there were guards on either side of them. It had nothing to do with him. He just walked.

Oberon kept his face stiff and heavy. The boy was in front of him, still and quiet and closed.

He's falling apart inside. Now he knows what I am.

It was a vast red fury now. Appetite.

What will you be, after this night? Will there be anything left?

He would hurt him. He would have to. He would unfold this child, and underneath there wouldn't be anything at all. And he would be able to think again, able to sleep again. He would be himself again,

and Leander would be just one more in an endless parade of victims.

Oberon keyed open the door to his rooms. "Inside," he said, pushing Leander past him. "Theren. I'll send for you sometime tomorrow to take him back to the Gallery," he said, and he stepped in, and locked the door, and they were alone.

bloodletting

The sound of the door locking was deafening, immense. Leander just stood where he'd been put. He looked at the floor, feeling Oberon come closer. He could hear himself breathing. He had never been so afraid in his entire life.

Oberon walked around him in a slow circle. "You're beautiful."

Leander was trying not to cry, and failing. "Please--"

"Please what?" He put his hand under the boy's jaw, tilted his head back. "Don't hurt you? Let you go? Or kiss you again?"

His mouth was inches from Leander's.

The tears came, then. He couldn't help it. "Don't," the boy said, crying, and stood up on his toes to be kissed.

He felt Oberon's hand move to the small of his back, closing around his wrists. He bent Leander back, and bit at his mouth, mocking Lucius and Camille.

This isn't the same. He didn't kiss me like this before. It's like he's serious, now.

The kiss had become ruthless, painful, and Oberon moved back and whispered, "Tell me what you thought of what you saw."

"You engineered that. All of it. You knew how each one of us would react," Leander said, trying to lean closer again.

Oberon put his fingertips on the boy's mouth, stopping him. "Except you. I was guessing about you. Now tell me what you thought."

Leander held Oberon's wrist, licked at his fingers. "Will you kill me

like that, when you get tired of me?"

Oberon closed his black eyes. "Not like that. Not someone like you. I would keep your death between us. Make you choose. Torture you for days." He was moving his fingers in the boy's mouth.

He bit Oberon's fingertip, hard, and pushed forward, leaned his forehead on Oberon's chest. That smell surrounded him again, decay and something dark and sweet underneath. He was devouring the words. "Would you?" he said, his voice muffled.

"Don't tempt me, Leander," he warned, his hands in the boy's hair, now. He was losing control of his voice.

"Today?"

"No."

"Tomorrow?"

"Stop it," Oberon hissed at him, and pushed him out at arm's length, catching hold of his hands, and pulling him towards the bedroom.

"Don't do this," Leander said, pleading again. He tried to squirm his hands free, and Oberon turned him and wound his arms around the boy, lifted him off his feet.

It was dizzying, unbearable. Oberon was a sketch of bone and wire around him, impossibly strong, merciless. "You're hurting me," he said. He didn't bother to struggle. He meant it to be an accusation, but it sounded more like a plea.

Oberon rearranged his hold, fumbled open the door, and brought Leander into the bedroom. This door, too, closed and locked.

He set Leander on his feet again, but did not let him go. Leander did struggle then, and Oberon laughed, very softly, pulled him closer and said, "What do you think you know about pain?"

Leander tried to answer, found his mouth empty, without words. He closed his eyes, invented, "It's all you seem to care about."

Oberon pulled the boy's head back, wrapped one hand around his throat, his fingers seeking the pressure points at the hinge of Leander's

jaw, and pressed hard and fast.

Leander bit back on the sound in his throat, but his spine drew itself concave, tight and sudden against Oberon's chest. He shook, hard, almost a convulsion. The pain was hot and strange, exploding like an insect sting, spreading down the sides of his neck, making his mouth wet. He ground his teeth together. I won't. I just won't. He'll stop.

Oberon pressed harder, fast again, and Leander was forced to make a strangled cry. He wrenched himself sideways, as hard as he could. He barely moved. Oberon laughed. "Will you make me bruise you, or do you want to stop pretending?"

Leander shook his head, silent, furious.

Oberon shifted his fingers slightly, pushed so viciously that Leander did something close to a scream. The pain was over as suddenly as it had happened, and the Septarch stroked down his neck, turned his hand, drew the backs of his nails up from the boy's collarbone up to the tip of his chin.

Wet eyelashes. Leander lost it, moaned, went limp and liquid.

Oberon let him go, went over to the bed and arranged himself there. Leander only stood, just in front of the door, eyes almost closed, balance unsteady. "You want me to go, don't you?" he mumbled. His hand went to his neck, hovered there, went back down to his side.

After a long sadistic pause, Oberon made a negative gesture with his eyes, and touched his fingertips to his mouth. Shhh. He said, "Come over here."

"I know what you want," Leander told him, trying and almost succeeding in meeting those inkblack eyes. "I'm not stupid."

"Aren't you," Oberon said, looking amused. "I told you to come over here. Didn't you understand that?"

Leander came closer. Oberon wasn't satisfied with his little baby step, and he looked hard at the floor just beside him, then back at Leander.

He walked forward again, stopped where he had been ordered to. He felt mechanical, dehydrated, afraid.

Oberon gestured at the boy's vinyl suit, the cloak. "Take all of that off."

Leander tried to meet his eyes again, startled, almost angry.

"Now."

Ice in that voice. And nothing at all in the eyes. The suit zipped in the front, from neck to waist. Leander dragged his numb hands to his collar, fumbled at the zipper. "I wish you wouldn't," he whispered, his eyes aching to look behind him, to the door. Oberon held his eyes, trapped.

"I don't care what your wishes are," Oberon said, his voice devoid of expression. Did his eyes flicker? Mockery? Something else?

He pulled the zipper down six inches, just above his sternum, and waited for a reprieve. There was none. The boy drew in a deep breath, finally managed to drop his eyes, and unzipped down to his waist. He glanced at Oberon one more time, struggled until he managed to pull his arms out of the vinyl sleeves.

"Stop," Oberon said, his voice a shade less perfect. He sat up, reached out his hand. Leander didn't understand at first, then reached back, tentative. Oberon grasped his fingers, pulled him even closer, until his mouth was inches from the boy's shoulder, their hands still closed together.

Leander tensed, expecting a bite. He could feel Oberon breathing against his skin, could feel the Septarch's hair brushing his ribs. Oberon moved lower, stopped at Leander's waist. "I can smell you," he said, so softly the boy almost couldn't understand him. "You're afraid."

"Yes, fine, I'm afraid." His voice was strained, jagged. If he bites me there, I'll scream, Leander thought.

Oberon laughed. "I haven't even done anything yet," he said, almost a warning, before he kissed Leander, just above his navel.

Heat. Ice. Terror. Leander sucked in his breath, shuddering, staring up at the dark vaulted ceiling. He knew he was going to be bitten. He could almost feel it, a thick ragged agony. He waited and waited for teeth. Instead, it was Oberon's tongue, so warm and startling that he

made a sound almost like a cry, cringing. "I don't understand," he whispered, and he meant it. He was falling, and his mind was struggling to add up the days, to calculate how long he had been here. It seemed important, urgent, suddenly, that he figure out how far away from Earth he had really come, and he knew that had to be measured somehow. Time was the only distance he could think of.

Oberon did not answer. He licked the boy again, a long delicate motion, and tugged at Leander's right foot until he lifted it, wavering, and pulled off his vinyl boot. The boy understood, picked up his other foot without being told, his hands coming down to Oberon's shoulders for balance.

"I know what happens now," Leander said, his voice sounding distant and vague in his own ears. Oberon was pulling off the vinyl suit, and he stepped out of it obediently, naked now except for the velvet cloak. "Don't you know that I'm afraid of you?" he said, without hope of being heard. "Don't you know what you're like to other people?"

He meant to say something else, something perfect, but Oberon buried his face in Leander's neck and inhaled, his hands pressed against the skin of the boy's back. "You don't smell like the others," he said, sounding as though he were analyzing something. "You almost smell like you're sentient."

This was irrational, cryptic, and it made complete sense to Leander. "I want to be sentient," he said, almost pleading, and he moved to wrap his arms around the Septarch, hesitated, and did it anyway. Oberon was kissing his neck, his mouth open and wet. It was unbearable. Some new kind of consciousness was in his skin. He was certain, suddenly, that out of a hundred kisses in a dark room he would know Oberon's mouth, that his skin had memorized it instantly, or even remembered it from a drug-induced dream. He wanted to speak, wanted to say something like I like this or don't stop but nothing he could think of seemed to fit. Oberon was pulling him onto the bed, and he couldn't move correctly. His joints were unhinged.

Hadn't he been afraid? He was on his back, now, the cloak crumpled and uncomfortable under him. He tried to squirm a little, to rearrange it, his eyes closed, Oberon's mouth close to his.

Oberon made a low, furious sound, and leaned back and hit him, twice, the blows unplanned and awkward. "Don't move," he hissed, and hit him again, this one catching him in the middle of his

collarbone.

Leander froze, startled more than hurt. He opened his eyes again, confused, scared, and Oberon caught his wrists, hard. Something grated against something else in his left hand, the pain sickening and stunning, and he didn't have breath to scream. He gasped, and managed, "I won't. I'm sorry—"

"What did you expect to find here? Some kind of dream?"

Oberon dragged him off the bed, pushed him onto the floor, and let him go. Leander twisted away from him, backed away until he was against the wall. He couldn't look up. The room was a heavy blur. He didn't know if he was about to cry, or lose consciousness. He crouched down there, shaking. "Stop it," he said, pleading, but with angry eyes. He wrapped his arms around his head. He wanted to disappear. "I can't...I don't...I can't."

He expected Oberon to laugh at him, or hit him, or call for Theren to take him away and bring him a better slave. Camille, maybe.

Instead, Oberon looked at him, and said, "Are you really so frightened?"

Leander gritted his teeth. "You know what? I used to fucking blow up buildings on a planet where the penalty for theft is having your hand cut off. I'm not afraid. And I know what you want," he said, accusing. "You want to fuck me. I know."

There. The words were in the air, now, sentient and unleashed. No swallowing them back again. No painting over the colors they made.

"Yes. And you want me to fuck you. Come here."

"Goddamnit, don't you understand? I can't do this. I can't...live up to you."

Oberon stepped towards him, very slowly, only a single step, with his hands out, palms turned towards the ceiling. He sank down to his knees, looking into the boy's face. "No. I don't understand. Explain it to me."

Leander hadn't expected that. It felt like a trap. He swallowed, sent a furtive glance beyond Oberon, seeking an escape that did not exist. He was trying to get his mind around what he was feeling, but it was

bigger and stranger than any emotion he knew. He knew all about rage, about frustration, and this was like those, and yet unlike them. "Before this...before here, and you...I was the only person like me. The only one. And now--"

"Now," Oberon said, softly, "You're no longer the only one like you. And it frightens you. Alone is all you've ever known, and now that it's gone...you mourn. You miss it, even though you hated it. It had become...familiar. Safe."

Leander's mouth was parchment-dry, his throat clotted. "How do you know that?" he demanded, in awe, startled out of his terror.

Oberon only looked at him, his face still. "How do you think I know?"

Leander let his arms drop, let his hands come to an uneasy rest in his lap. "What do you want me to say?"

"What do you want? Did anyone ever ask you that?" Oberon whispered, more to himself than to the boy. "People take everything they hate about themselves and make it into a wall they can live inside, and they call it safe," he said. "Aren't you tired of being...safe?"

Leander shook his head, speechless, and leaned over until his forehead rested against the floor, stretched out his arms like an Egyptian in front of the Pharaoh. "Does it have to be like this?" Leander said, feeling cold. "Does this have to be so...so hateful?"

"How is it hateful?"

"It's like you...now that you're going to do this you don't like me anymore. Like you don't think of me as a person anymore, and I guess I thought that you did. Or you were starting to," Leander said, still miserable.

"Don't move," Oberon warned him again, softly, and reached out and touched his face, the line of his jaw. "I don't know how to think of you. I don't know what I think of you. I've had hundreds of you, and sometimes I don't even remember the names. I don't really care."

"Do you remember my name?"

"Leander," Oberon said, almost smiling. "You seem to think I'm something I'm not. You seem to admire me. I think I hate you."

Leander understood that. He didn't exactly smile, but he felt something icy and petrified in his stomach beginning to unravel. "I think I hate you too."

Oberon slapped him. Not hard, and not very quickly. Leander let it turn his head, let his breath leave him in a long slow rush. "How dare you understand me," he mumbled, through lips that were almost numb, and he heard Oberon laugh. "Unmake me," he said, finally, in a tiny voice. "Take it away. Everything. They've put things in my head that don't belong there."

"Unmake you?"

Oberon stood up, too quickly, staring down at him in something very like horror, the expression of a man whose wish had just been granted.

"Yes." Leander sat up again, pleading up at the Septarch, his eyes wild and frightened and determined, all at once. "Yes."

Oberon reached down, cupped the boy's face in his hands. He spoke very slowly, very clearly. "I will give you...this one chance...to take that back."

"No," Leander told him. "I won't. I meant it."

"What you are right now, you will never be again," Oberon warned him.

"Good," Leander said, fierce, unrepentant.

He picked Leander up and carried him back to bed. Leander put out his hands, trying to catch himself, and found Oberon's shoulders.

The Septarch found the catch for the velvet cloak and unfastened it and pulled it away. He's burning me, Leander thought, and his hands closed in Oberon's hair, pulling his head close. He was lost in texture, velvet robes against his legs, Oberon's hair brushing his ribs. "You kiss me," he breathed, and Leander kissed hard, trying to choke him with his tongue. He pulled away so he could speak, and Leander bit at his chin, licking his face, frantic.

"Do you even know what I want to do to you?"

He did know. Well, he knew in theory. This is why they always tell you not to get in a transport with a stranger, Leander thought. They're afraid it might be someone like you. "I think...maybe you want to put your hands on me, and put your fingers...in me...like the doctor did, but--"

Oberon laughed, very softly. "Oh, you're perfect," he said, almost moaning, and pushed Leander onto his back on the bed. He looked at him, intently, then said, "You really don't have any idea, do you?"

Leander shook his head, blushing. "Maybe...kiss me, and lay on top of me?"

Oberon did that, and said in his ear, "It's not my fingers I want to put inside you," and took Leander's hand and put it under his robes.

He'd known that. Though he'd thought it was only done in books.

"Will it hurt?"

"Probably," he said, his voice rough and heavy. He pushed Leander's hands over his head.

Leander closed his eyes. Oberon was crushing him, and he couldn't breathe, and he felt his knees pushed up and apart and then pain ripped up into him, and he screamed, pulling frantically to free his wrists, his heels slipping on the fur bedcover. Oberon pushed into him deeper, harder, and the boy bit his shoulder hard enough to draw blood.

The Septarch slapped him, once, then harder. It made him dizzy, made the room blur, and he tried to say, I don't understand, but he made a noise like an animal that wasn't even words.

His hands closed around Leander's neck. "Don't," he snarled at the boy, "If you scream, I'll choke you to death."

Oh, my god...so long...waited so long...

It has to be this way. This is the beginning. He has to destroy me, first, and invent me all over again.

His body came up off the bed in a liquid arc, and he whispered,

"Scratch me,"

And Oberon did, his nails gashing from Leander's neck to his waist, his hair blinding them both.

Leander screamed. He had to. He was sure his throat would burst if he didn't. And there was luxury in that, screaming as loud as he wanted, and then he didn't even know if he was screaming anymore.

"Leander," Oberon whispered.

The boy was saying something muffled into the pillow. He was curled up on his side, and Oberon had to lean close to hear him. "...liked what you were doing...but it hurt so much...maybe...maybe if next time you wouldn't do it so hard..."

Oberon got very quiet. "Does it still hurt?"

Leander nodded, crying soundlessly.

"Where?"

"Well...inside. And my stomach, and my back...just everywhere."

Oberon pushed at him until he gave in and lay on his stomach. He kept his knees under him. "Don't. It hurts too much to move."

Oberon touched him, pushed gently. "Does that hurt?"

Leander didn't move, didn't breathe. "Yeah," he said, and squirmed. "You could do it again, though. If you wanted to--oh."

Oberon's thumbs were rubbing circles in the small of his back, hard, in just the right place. "Relax. Straighten your legs out. Breathe."

"Your hands are so warm..."

He kissed the boy, in the middle of his back. Leander's eyes opened by themselves. He closed them again, tried to memorize that single kiss. He didn't know why, but he wanted to keep that sensation.

"I can show you something that won't hurt. If you trust me." He licked down Leander's spine, to the end of his tailbone, and waited. Leander pushed back towards him, just barely.

He drove his tongue in, almost viciously.

Oh my god, I never even thought of this.

Leander made a terrible noise, and froze, and choked out, "More..."

He held Leander's hips and pulled him back and pushed his tongue in deeper, and reached under him and slid his hand down his stomach, scratching to his cock.

Leander bit into the pillow, and lost his mind.

Oberon slipped out from under Leander's arm. He leaned close to make sure the boy was asleep, then crept into the other room and sat down in front of his computer.

He didn't turn it on.

He liked it. He wanted me.

It wasn't rape. Not even when I hurt him.

There was semen drying on his stomach, clotted in his hair. He pulled the ends of his hair into his mouth, sucking on it, and the taste made him want to wake the boy up.

No. Not yet. There was part of the ritual, still. It all had to be done precisely. Otherwise, who knew what might happen?

He turned the computer on. He typed in a code from a file marked FULL CIRCLE, and selected audio only.

It chirped, whirred, and informed him that it had established a connection. He clicked receive.

"Hello?" came a man's voice, rough and hoarse. There was faint static--there always was on an interplanetary line.

"Is this Paul Schaiden?" Oberon asked.

"Yes...who is this?"

"You know who this is," he said, grinning a rictus at the blank screen, making his voice cold and deadly.

There was silence, and then tension like a physical presence, when Paul suddenly did know who it was. "Bastard--"

"I just fucked your son, Paul. He's as tight as a boy half his age. I still have his come in my hair."

Shock. Silence.

"I laid him out on his back and fucked him up the ass. He loved it. You should have heard the noises he made."

The sound that came through the speaker was inhuman, a roar of grief and fury. "I swear, I will KILL--"

Oberon's eyes rolled back.

He listened, letting Paul go on for at least two minutes. Sometimes he laughed, and that sent the man into absolute incoherency.

"Jealous, Paul?" he said, finally. He clicked the disconnect.

"Oberon?" came Leander's voice from the doorway, sleepy and curious. "Who was that?"

He turned in his chair. Leander was naked, yawning, his eyes bright with sleep, his hair mussed.

Something went wrong, then. There was a sensation deep under his ribs, as if one of the implants was malfunctioning. "Come here," he said, his voice different from what he'd had in mind.

He did. Oberon put his hands on the boy's shoulders pushed him down on his knees. "I want to teach you something," he said, pulling Leander's head into his lap.

Leander kept his head on Oberon's knee. The boy's mouth was wet, his skin bright with sweat. "I like that. Almost as much as I like kissing," he said.

Oberon was stroking the boy's face with his fingertips. "Do you?" he said, his voice distant and strange.

Leander reached up, ran his fingers along the jagged graffiti of scars on Oberon's chest. "What happened?"

Oberon shoved his hand away. "Don't. I know they're ugly."

Leander knelt up, took Oberon's face in his hands. "Stop saying that," he ordered. "There's nothing ugly about you." And he leaned over, and kissed the marred skin of Oberon's chest.

There was a brief fierce tangle in the Septarch's mind. Kill him. Choke him. Break him. Don't allow this.

Oberon moved his hands out of the boy's way, and let him.

He cares about this. He's trying to comfort me.

No one ever tried to comfort me.

The decision was made, in that moment. "There's a wooden box, up over the fireplace," he said, after a long time. "Bring it to me."

Leander did. He tried to sit on the floor again, but Oberon said, "No. Lean your head back. Close your eyes."

The boy heard the box open, and then cold sharp metal was against his throat. His breath left him in a sudden wrench, and he would have fainted, but Oberon said, "It's all right. Don't you trust me?"

Oberon cut him, three shallow horizontal stripes across his throat, like the marks of an animal. The pain was bright and clear, and something warm and sticky was trickling down his neck. Leander opened his eyes, raised his hand to his neck. They were deep scratches, not really actual wounds. Oberon drew him close, caught his fingers, drew them into his mouth up to the boy's hand, sucking hard. Leander shuddered. "Why did you do that?"

Oberon traced the cuts with the ball of his thumb, drew crimson lines down the boy's forehead, along each cheekbone. "Now you're mine. It marks you as my favorite, my only favorite."

met-a-morpho-sis (mèt'e-môr'lfe-sîs) noun

plural met-a-morpho-ses (-sêz')

1. A transformation, as by magic or sorcery.

2. A marked change in appearance, character, condition, or function.

3. Biology. A change in the form and often habits of an animal during normal development after the embryonic stage. Metamorphosis includes, in insects, the transformation of a maggot into an adult fly and a caterpillar into a butterfly and, in amphibians, the changing of a tadpole into a frog.

4. Pathology. A usually degenerative change in the structure of a particular body tissue.

[Latin metamorphosis, from Greek, from metamorphoun, to transform :

meta-, meta- + morphê, form.]

transformation

"What is it, Theren?"

"You asked that I bring you this as soon as it arrived, lord Septarch."

Theren put a disk on Oberon's desk. "It's all his records. I have them in hard copy, but the sheer volume--"

"This will be fine. That's all."

Oberon inserted the disk. It took him almost three hours to read it all, even at his speed.

Then, he clipped several pages, saved them onto another disk, and sent for Theren again.

"This is all the information about Leander's school. He was...beaten for a sketch of Jesus he drew."

Theren didn't understand. "We have the sketch, lord--"

"I already have the sketch. I want the paddle," he said.

Leander was still sleeping when Oberon returned to his rooms. He ran his fingers along the boy's ribs. Leander squirmed and mumbled

something, and opened his eyes.

"I have something for you," Oberon said. There was a flat package in his hand, wrapped in shiny black paper.

Leander sat up, rubbed at his eyes. "A present?" His looked at the package, then back up at Oberon.

He dropped the package in the boy's lap and stood up. "It's not a present. It's yours already. I'm just giving it back to you," he said, shortly. He walked over to a low table, picked up the black glass bottle and poured himself some absinthe. "Open it."

Leander did, carefully.

It was his sketch of Jesus, in a silver frame.

"I had it restored. They cleaned it, and treated it. It's a little yellow, but it--" Oberon stopped. Leander was making an odd sound that might have been laughter. He turned, sighed. "Why are you crying?"

Leander cried harder, and pressed his forehead against the glass frame. "I just...really wanted this back, is all." He sniffled, and looked up at Oberon, his cheeks wet. "It looks like your statue."

"Yes," Oberon said. "It does."

Theren sat with his forehead flat on the edge of his desk. The communications program had been open and blinking ready patiently at him for the past half-hour.

He sighed, broke his own rule and reached for the bottom left drawer. Inside was a bottle of vodka, imported from Earth, not synthesized. He opened it and drank enough in a single pull to set his eyes streaming. He shoved it back into the drawer, covered his face briefly, and keyed in the comm number.

A pristine logo appeared--Mary with her arms outstretched, with a frigid expression on her face that Theren figured was supposed to be benevolent. This was quickly replaced by a secretary who might have been pretty if she'd worn makeup and not cut her hair prison-short. "This is Kayla Marcam at Lady of Mercy Primary School. God bless you. How may I direct your call?"

Earth. The one thing he didn't hate about his job was that he didn't live on fucking Earth.

"I'm speaking on behalf of the Septarch. My name is Theren. Quit that," he said, when she covered her mouth, attempting to hyperventilate. "We don't want any more of your kids right now. I'm looking for a man named--" He checked the blurry printout that he'd crumpled and flattened again. "Isaac Newton. No, Isaac Norton. He was your, um, Discipline Coordinator." Head Torturer in charge of small boys. Sort of like me, he thought. "Is he still employed there?"

"He retired two years ago, sir. I have his home code if you--"

"No," Theren said, sighing. "Look. Here's what I need. You guys...um, when you take a whack at a kid, you use a...a paddle, right?"

She stared at him. She probably would have disconnected if not for that magic word--Septarch.

Theren cleared his throat, blushing, and shuffled through his printouts. "The Septarch chose a boy named Leander Schaiden who went to your school in 2438. He was, ah, you guys used a paddle on him, and I need it. I want to buy it from you. I guess you still have it. Do they ever wear out?"

The look she gave him made him cough again. "I'll transfer you five hundred credits plus the cost of two-day transport. Find it," he snapped.

He put her on hold, and groped again for the bottom drawer.

Theren brought Leander back that night. He was dressed this time in velvet robes, dark red. Camille had glared at that, the synthetic skin on her lower lip and down her chin gleaming. Theren had whispered to him that it meant the same thing as the cuts. Slaves wore the vinyl, only.

The first thing Leander noticed was his sketch. It was over the fireplace in the front room, flanked by twin torches. He stared at that, and something broke loose in his stomach.

Oberon was sitting at the little table there, his computer on but

forgotten. He was doing something to his eyes, and when he looked up at Leander the boy nearly screamed. "What happened?"

The ink-black of his right eye was gone. That eye was now a complicated glittering silver mesh. "They're UV shields. To protect the implants. The light will damage them eventually," Oberon explained, slipping out the other one and putting both into a little crystal container.

"Are you a robot?"

Oberon laughed at that. "No. These, and my lungs, other things are implants. Immortality comes at a price."

Leander moved closer, hesitant. "Can I see?"

"My eyes, maybe. Letting you see the rest of them would require extensive surgery."

"What about...um..."

He laughed again. "No. That's flesh. I promise you." He pulled Leander into his lap.

The boy peered closer at these new eyes. What would have been the white of a human eye was like a spherical circuit board, and little flashes of electricity leapt from one node to the other. The iris was minuscule slats of metal, and as he watched it spiraled shut like a valve or a pinwheel. He leaned back, startled. "Did you do that on purpose?"

Oberon did it with both eyes, more slowly. He wasn't smiling. "Does it disgust you?" he asked, quietly.

"Of course not. They're beautiful." Leander reached up with one curious finger, without thinking. He pulled his hand back, blushing. "Sorry."

Oberon took the boy's hand and put it on his face. "You can touch. If you want to."

Leander ran his finger over Oberon's eyelid, put it briefly in his mouth to wet it and touched the eye itself, very gently. There was a soft transparent covering, slick and warm like flesh. He traced around the

iris, carefully. He could feel energy thrumming under his fingertip. Oberon made a low noise, deep in his throat. Leander stopped immediately, about to apologize, and Oberon's hand closed over his, hard, and drew his fingers back to his eye.

"Does it hurt?" Leander breathed, fascinated.

"Yes. It hurts. Don't stop."

He pulled back Oberon's lower eyelid, to see how far in the implant went. Under the eyeball there was dark pink flesh like in Leander's own eye. He scratched his fingernail along it, experimenting.

Oberon groaned, and pulled the boy hard against him, grinding up into him. His head fell back, and Leander pushed back his hair and held his eye wide open with his fingertips, and leaned over to touch it with the tip of his tongue.

Oberon dug his fingernails into the boy's back, shuddering. "Oh, you're perfect."

Leander licked around his eye again, flicked at his eyelashes. "I want you to fuck me while I do this," he whispered," he said, and he put his hand between them and rubbed hard, held Oberon's eye open wider, licking with delicate violent strokes.

Oberon traced the bridge of Leander's nose, leaned over and whispered, "Take my breath."

They shared the same breath, mouth to mouth, until both were dizzy. Oberon whispered, "I need you to get dressed. Theren will be here soon."

Leander stared at him. "Theren?"

"Yes, Theren. Your guard? To take you back to the Gallery."

"Oh," Leander said, empty.

Oberon hugged him hard. "You'll be back here before dawn."

Theren came back less than an hour later. His finger was poised over the keypad when Oberon opened the door. "Did you get it?"

Theren handed him something wrapped in red silk. "It's the same one. I have four people who testified to that."

Oberon unwrapped it, closed his fingers around the handle. "Oh, it's the same one," he murmured. It was three feet of heavy oak, an inch thick, worn smooth as glass from years of use. He looked at Theren. "I want him back here at midnight. Dress him like we talked about before. He might try to fight you. Force him, but don't hurt him, and absolutely do not drug him."

"Does he know what you're going to do, lord Septarch?" Theren asked, before he realized how completely inappropriate it was.

Oberon didn't even notice. "No," he said.

"Should I have Cayle ready to--"

"Probably," the Septarch said, and closed the door.

Leander looked at Theren and said, "He wants me to wear that?"

Theren dropped an armload of gray Earth Standard-issue clothes on Leander's bed. Pants and shirt. His school uniform. "Yes. And no paint."

Leander shrugged, and pulled the shirt over his head.

The front room was pitch black. Not even the fireplace was lit. Leander stood waiting for his eyes to adjust.

An artificial light clicked on in the bedroom. "Leander," Oberon said, standing silhouetted in the doorway.

Leander saw what he was holding. He didn't move. The trembling set in, and he turned in one frantic motion and began struggling with the latch in the door behind him.

"It's locked," Oberon said, and he stepped out of the doorway, and the door to the bedroom closed automatically, and Leander couldn't see him at all, couldn't hear him, had no idea how close he might be.

He stood with his back pressed against the door, shaking, and he said, "Get away."

"It's the same one. I had it shipped from Earth," he said, so close that Leander tried to run and fell over something, and sprawled hard on the stone floor in the dark.

"You don't understand. It's not funny," he cried out at the room. "I won't let you do this--"

And Oberon had him, and Leander screamed and kicked, and his arms were pinned at his side, and he could feel the paddle cold against his leg, still in Oberon's hand. "Stop it," he said, next to Leander's ear. "Just stop."

"You don't understand," Leander choked out again, breathless and hurting, and then the tears came in a hot stinging rush. "I won't let you."

He kissed the boy, and Leander kept his mouth closed and tried to turn his face away for an eternity, but he couldn't keep it up.

He gave in, his mouth open, and Oberon said against his lips, "I want to be the most terrible thing that's ever happened to you. Can you understand that? I want to be the only nightmare you ever have."

He licked at Leander's face, at his eyelids, tasting tears. The boy's eyelashes brushed his cheek, damp and delicate. He whispered, in agony, "I can't."

Oberon set him on his feet, and reached past him and touched the wall control. The bedroom door opened behind them, casting dim yellow light into the room. "Go in there and wait for me," he said, his voice like Halloween.

"Bastard," Leander mumbled, his lips paralyzed. He covered his face and turned away, stumbled into the bedroom and lay on the bed, numb. He could hear them, in his head, hundreds of children. They were never on your side, not when the teachers were watching. They

were counting in unison--fifty, forty-nine, forty-eight, forty-seven...

He heard footsteps, felt the mattress sink beside him. He cringed, his arms covering his head.

He felt it on his ankle, cold and wicked, sliding up along his leg, over his ass, up his spine, against the back of his neck. He was crying again, and the paddle was gone, and Oberon drew him up close, and whispered, "How did they do it?"

"Why? Why do you have to do this? Why are you like this?"

"Tell me how."

"Please," he said his chest hitching. "I'll suck you again. You can fuck me as hard as you want. Just not this."

"Leander."

"God damn you anyway!" Leander cried at him, and he struggled again, his foot shoving the paddle across the bed, but Oberon had his wrists, and he reached under the back of the boy's legs and held him cradled that way, rocking him.

Leander gave up. "What the fuck does it matter how? Just go ahead and do it. I can't stop you and...I really just wish you'd get it the fuck over with," he sobbed, in staccato. "And don't fucking hold me like you're being nice to me. You're not."

Oberon said something into his hair. All Leander caught was tears and terror. Then he said, "Tell me how."

"You want to know how?" he snapped, squirming one hand free and scrubbing at his face. "How. Okay, here's how. They sat me in this little room and then this guy comes in with that goddamned paddle you have, and he grabs me by my wrist. And I realize, he's going to hit me. This motherfucker is actually going to hit me. And just when I think it couldn't possibly get any worse, he fucking drags me into the auditorium. And there are a million kids there. The principal, he's just gotten done telling them all about me, and he's holding my drawing, and he turns around and looks at me like he hates me. He just...I could see it in his face, you know. He just hated me. And I didn't even know why."

The boy drew in a long, shuddering breath. "So then they make me take my pants down, and lean over this chair, and sort of brace my hands on the arms of it. That's when I knew it was going to be really, really bad. They always just make you grab your ankles, even girls. They only use the chair if you think you're going to fall."

He didn't say anything else for a long time. Then, he said, "That's how they did it, all right?"

Oberon had his hand up the back of the boy's shirt. He was tracing tiny circles on the skin over Leander's spine. "How many?"

"Damn it--"

"How many times?"

"Fifty, all right? You know how I know that? They had every fucking person there counting. Backwards. From fifty."

Oberon kissed him hard, and let him go.

He got up and left the room.

Leander closed his eyes, and he heard a scraping sound, and it absolutely couldn't be what he thought it was. He sat up.

Oberon dragged the heavy chair into the bedroom, set it by the bed. "Stand up," he said, the paddle in his hand.

Leander fell twice. His hands would just go limp and he would crumple onto the floor. Each time Oberon just looked at him, waiting, not saying a word, and when Leander got up again he would go on. Hitting him.

The third time he couldn't get up. "Leander."

"I can't," he rasped.

"Try."

He did try, and he made it up onto his hands and knees. His stomach knotted, and he gritted his teeth, but it didn't help. He puked until he was choking up bile. He just managed to push himself away before his

arms gave out, and he lay there and pressed his face hard into the cold floor.

Oberon picked up the rug from in front of the fireplace, and dropped it over the mess. He knelt beside Leander, his fingers probing at the boy's neck. Leander realized he was checking his pulse.

He wiped at the boy's mouth, his face with the sleeve of his robe, and he picked him up, very carefully, and put him on the bed on his stomach, and pulled his pants from around his ankles, and took off the gray shirt, and pitched both into the fireplace. Leander opened his eyes, and saw him break the paddle over his knee, and toss it in after his clothes.

"Was it like that?" he asked, and came over and stroked Leander's hair.

"No," he whispered. "It was nothing like that."

Oberon lay beside him, careful not to jostle him, and pressed kisses on his spine, the nape of his neck, his hair. "You have no idea how I cherish you. I have never had a slave even remotely like you," he said, softly.

"I thought you were going to kill me. I thought...you weren't ever going to stop," he said, and began to cry again, raggedly, like a very small child in terrible pain.

Oberon closed his eyes, and something was happening in his chest that made him wonder if he was ill. "I told you I wouldn't. And I won't. I was just beginning to...unmake you."

Leander made a strangled sound at that, that wasn't quite a word, and then he was silent, thinking, beginning to?

Oberon put his hand just at Leander's waist, carefully. "Does it hurt?"

"Fuck you. How can you even ask me that?"

Oberon smiled at that. "The minute I tell you I cherish you, you just think you can talk to me all kinds of ways," he said, and moved his fingertips down, past the boy's waist, placing his palm flat on Leander's buttocks.

"What color did your eyes used to be?"

Oberon froze, startled. "Brown," he whispered, finally. Something was terribly wrong with his throat. "They were brown."

He got up, his fingers trailing down the back of Leander's leg, went to an ebony bureau and rummaged through until he found a flat leather case. He opened it. Seated in a red velvet lining were a syringe and several vials.

He filled it, tapped out the bubble. Leander watched him. "What is it?"

"Give me your arm."

"Why?"

"Because, Leander, I can't very well give it to you in your ass right now. You're a bruise from your waist to your ankles. You're bleeding in places."

"Why not?"

Oberon stared him, saw that he was serious. "I could really get to like you."

He picked the place where it was the worst, where the left cheek of the boy's buttocks met with the back of his thigh. The bruises there were already darkening to a furious blackviolet.

He drove the needle in hard, wringing a cry out of Leander, and pushed the plunger in slow, and pulled it out and rubbed the knot with his fingers, put his mouth over the puncture and sucked once, hard, the chemicals instantly numbing his mouth. Leander's back arched, pushing him closer.

Oberon loaded the syringe again for himself. "I want to do it," Leander said, still watching him.

He put the needle in the crook of his arm, leaned over and held it steady, and let Leander push the plunger in. "Really get to like you," he murmured again, his eyes rolling back.

He put the syringe back in its case, shoved it in the drawer and crawled into bed. "Move your legs apart," he whispered to Leander, and he wet two fingers in his mouth and pushed them up inside him.

"I want you to sleep like this," he said, moving close, his face against the boy's ribs.

Leander sighed. "I don't want to go back to my room."

"You're not," Oberon said. "You're mine, now. There's nothing you can do to get away."

Leander whimpered, low in his chest. "Say that again."

"Mine. You'll never get away. I'll do things to you that will make you forget this ever happened."

"I won't forget," the boy whispered, and added, fiercely, "I don't want you to ever send for Camille again. I hate her."

He wants me to do this? Me? And only to him?

Oberon pushed his fingers in deeper, until he found the place inside where Leander was sticky, and hot enough to burn him. "There is no Camille."

jezebel

What have you done?

I didn't have a choice, Leander told the guilty voice wailing inside him. And if I had, I would have done it anyway.

He's your mother's killer. And now you're his whore.

That argument about his mother was a flimsy place to try and cultivate guilt. He was sick of it. The guilt had nothing to do with that, and he didn't mind it. It suited him, somehow, that same luscious thrill it had given him to use the illegal drugs, or to sit at church while mentally reciting blasphemies. The perfect satisfaction of really being as bad as they'd always told him he was.

Don't tell anyone I did this to you.

He turned over, rubbed his face against Oberon's arm. The skin

between the scars was absolutely smooth, and he smelled like mildew and myrrh and chocolate. Leander licked him, sleepily. He felt him tense, and he drew back, not wanting to wake him.

Oberon said something, and Leander whispered, "What is it?"

He sat up, worried suddenly for some inexplicable reason.

There was a faint glow, and it terrified him until he realized it was Oberon's eyes, flaring, without the UV shields to cover them. There was a faint whirring sound, like the gears of a chrono if you held it up to your ear. Oberon's irises, closing and opening. He was staring up into the dark.

He's dreaming, Leander thought. It's REM sleep. But he was making an awful noise, very faint, like muffled screaming.

Leander shook him, gently. Oberon was freezing cold, and he didn't respond. Then he whimpered, "My eyes..." like a child, and said in a new voice, "PROCESSING."

His voice made Leander pull away, covering his ears. It was metallic, resonant, but agonized, like a robot making an obscene comm call. "You're scaring me," Leander whispered to him, even though he knew no one could hear him. "Please. Wake up."

It was the child voice, again. "...don't...don't let...anymore..." A boy's voice, bleached and hopeless. Leander shook him again, harder, then lay on him in despair, trying to warm him.

"What is it? What do you see?"

He laid his head on Oberon's chest. He could hear his heart, slamming hard and fast and frantic, so fast the boy was afraid he was seriously ill. "Is it him? The other one? The first Septarch?" he asked.

"Coming back," Oberon said, to something or someone who was no longer there.

"I'm here," Leander told him, clutching his shoulders hard, hoping he could feel it, wherever he was.

Theren waited outside with a stretcher, looking awkwardly at his feet while Oberon kissed Leander goodbye. "Take him to Cayle," Oberon said, still looking at the boy.

Leander turned and saw the stretcher. He looked back at Oberon, and clung to his robes. "No--"

"Leander, he's a doctor. My doctor. He won't--"

"No," Leander said again. "Please."

The Septarch didn't understand. Leander's eyes were filling with tears. "I don't want to go."

"He has to look at you. I might have--"

"Come with me," Leander begged, suddenly. "Please. I'll go if you come with me."

Oberon studied him. He wants me there. I did that to him, and he wants me there to comfort him. "If I go, will you stop it?"

"Yes," Leander promised.

Oberon sighed, but he went.

Theren was fine, just fine, until Cayle undressed Leander, and he saw the bruises.

He sat, drymouthed and longing to leave, and Oberon sat across from him, and gave him one of those looks, and he sat obedient and silent, and watched Cayle. He spoke to Leander at first, his voice low and gentle, and the boy's face went from furious and defensive to a hesitant, reluctant kind of trust.

Theren could hear them, but he didn't understand a word of it. He was blinded by the bruises, black and purple and bleeding in places--bleeding, for Christ's sake--and the boy's quiet consent to being examined, and the occasional looks of worship and hunger that he gave Oberon.

Look how he looks at him. He thinks he's in love. That's the bastard

that did this to him, and he thinks he's in love.

Theren didn't move. He sat there, thinking, This is just a boy. And you're just a coward, like you've always been.

Everything in him screamed, Get up! He's just a boy! He doesn't even understand! What kind of a man are you to watch this happen?

He sat there, sick and still. He didn't move.

When Leander got back to his cell he stared at it all, stunned. There was a drawing table, laden with little cubbyholes filled with pencils, paint, and brushes. There were piles and piles of expensive smooth paper, and there was a wooden box on the foot of his bed.

He went to it, opened it. Sitting on the very top was his journal.

He hugged it to his chest, briefly, irrationally happy to have it back, and flipped it open. All there. But there was strange handwriting, in red ink, elegant and angular, on the first blank page.

Leander,

I know you didn't ask me, but if you still want to know--there's nothing wrong with you. You're like me. Some of us were born different. Better, maybe, than everyone else.

Yes, I read your journal.

Your keycode is 48770-K. It will open your cell and almost every other door in the Sphere. If you take a left when you leave the Gallery you'll come to a door that leads into a garden.

Come to my room tonight. I'm sure you know the way by now.

There are pictures for you in the envelope to add to your collection. I don't know if you'll like them, but I suspect you will.

Until tonight.

There was no signature, only the looped cross etched carefully in ink the color of blood.

In the box was an envelope. He opened it, his hands shaking.

Photographs.

It was Jyana.

And Oberon.

He looked at them for a long time.

T

There was a battle going on inside him. There was one part of him, the part that couldn't answer when Oberon had asked, Should I let him fuck her? about Lucius and Camille.

That part was screaming.

But there was another part of him, that wise sarcastic voice that fit so comfortably in his mouth, and it was laughing and laughing, and the screaming was drowned out.

Leander got up, carrying the photographs. He went to the drawing table and sat in the little chair, and he tilted the table up at a sharp angle, and set the photographs in the little pencil tray.

He picked up a dark red pencil, and began to draw.

life imitates art

"Leander."

The boy was startled out of it. His hand was one terrible cramp, and his neck and his back and his eyes were aching.

Oberon was standing just outside his cell, watching him with his eyes soft and his mouth amused. "It's late. I waited for you."

"Oh, God...I'm sorry, I just forgot, and I was...How long have you been there?" he asked, embarrassed, flustered, groping for a blank sheet of paper and putting it in front of his half-finished sketch.

"Just a few minutes. You didn't even know I was here. Your face..." Oberon stopped, made a sound as if he was clearing his throat. "You were absolutely absorbed in what you were doing. And you were talking to yourself, but I couldn't understand any of it."

"I just never got to draw before. Really really draw, whatever I wanted, with pencils and things that are this good. The colors are perfect, and they don't skip or gouge..." Leander stopped. He was babbling. He blushed, feeling like an idiot. "I guess...thank you."

Oberon opened the door. Leander was shaking his hand, closing and opening the fingers, and Oberon's fingers wrapped around his. "Don't thank me. You...needed these things."

"How much of it did you...see already?" Leander asked him.

"Don't worry. I was watching you, not what you were doing. I didn't look at it. It's...unfair to do that until it's finished."

"Yes. Exactly," Leander said. "But I want you to see it when it is. Finished, I mean."

Oberon nodded. "I could show you some of my...work. If you want."

Leander tried to stand. His feet were asleep, and he had to clutch at Oberon to keep from sitting down again. "Of course I want to. Is it more sculptures, like the one in your room?"

"Some of it. It's...unpleasant," Oberon warned him.

Leander sighed. "When are you going to figure out that I don't see things the way the rest of them do?"

"I've figured it out," he said, and they were leaving the Gallery. "I just don't know if I believe it yet."

The entrance to the Museum was a pair of vast double doors, like the doors of a cathedral. There was no keypad. Oberon pulled one of them open, and it swung silently outward, perfectly balanced. He let Leander go in first, and he pulled the door closed behind them, and a

thousand things rushed into his mouth, wanting to be said. No. I won't say a word. I want to see him react, without interference.

They were in the vestibule, and there were twin torches, and a silver bowl on a stand, filled with dark liquid. Leander went to this, dipped his fingers in, sniffed at them. And then he smiled, and touched his forehead, and his throat, and his fingers left crimson smears, and he turned to Oberon, and went up on tiptoe, and marked him the same way, and left a red thumbprint on his mouth. "Leander, don't," he said, breathing hard.

Leander had already turned. On the black wall above there was a skeleton, absolutely flat, each bone separated from the other, laid out in careful precise order. "Can I?" he whispered, raising one hand, hesitating.

"Go ahead. It's not just for looking. None of it is."

"How did you do it?"

"I separated each joint from the others. Every one of them. The skull was the hardest part. The joints there are completely fused, and it kept splintering on me. I kept ruining it after I had everything else done, and it took about a week each time, and it's not easy to get them clean. Chemicals will ruin the bone after a year or two. You just have to use water, mostly, and sodium bicarbonate, and really scrub. Finally it occurred to me to do the skull first, and--"

He stopped.

He couldn't remember the last time he had done that-said more than a few sentences together.

There was something addictive about it, the idea of speaking entire thoughts, and knowing someone was listening.

Leander was running his fingers along ribs, the femur, and the tiny mosaic of teeth. "I guess you couldn't have just used a different skull."

"Mmm. No. That would be--" He searched for the word. "Incoherent. Not expressive at all." Shaking! I am fucking shaking! Why?

"What are these?"

Oberon took in a deep breath. He could not believe how hard this was, how nervous it was making him. He was desperate to have this boy's...what? Approval? It was a new sensation, desiring something he could not take by force, and he was almost positive he didn't like it. Not at all. "They're the bones from the inside of the ear."

Leander nodded, still entranced. "They look like...like pieces of sea shells." He turned, and looked at Oberon then, and said, "You could use ants."

Oberon blinked at him, not comprehending. "Ants? For what?"

"To clean them. Ants would do it and I don't think it would damage the bone at all. It might take them a couple of months, though."

He's faking that! He has to be! But how would he? Nobody can MAKE their mind work that way unless it already does...

His heart was slamming into his ribs, and he said, "I never thought of that." It struck him hard, without warning. He was going to fall and he reached out his hands, wavering, and put them over his ears and went down on his knees.

He felt Leander put his arms around him, and the boy whispered, "It happens to you too, doesn't it?"

"What?" he said, his face against the boy's shoulder, and his mouth wasn't working right, and he was afraid he'd said help, and he said "What?" again, slowly and very carefully.

"I used to call it the Fury. It's like everything is too loud and too bright and big, and it's like the whole world is doing it on purpose, and it makes you so mad you can't even see, but it's scary, because it feels like you're--"

"Falling," Oberon finished. "And it hurts." He was breathing very deeply, but it was like his lungs had collapsed, and there just wasn't any air. He felt Leander pulling at him, and he was lying on his back looking up at the dissected skeleton, and his head was resting in the boy's lap, and Leander was stroking his hair, rubbing at his temples, tracing around his eye sockets. His fingers were cool and soft and gentle, and it helped. Nothing else had ever helped, except the heroin.

"It's okay," Leander was saying, the way you would talk to a small

child who was afraid...very afraid, he thought, and then oh God he thought he would start laughing, his throat was convulsing, and Leander put his hand there, over his throat, and it stopped, and it left him like a demon exorcised, and he was limp and still, eyes drifting closed.

He reached up and closed his hands over the boy's, and pulled them to his mouth and was kissing his fingers.

"...when you do it?"

"What?"

Leander's voice was shaking, but he was trying to be calm. "I said, how will you kill me when you do it?"

"I'm not," he whispered. He didn't realize until he said it that he actually meant it. "I'm not going to kill you," he said again, and it sounded right. He liked it, the way that sounded.

"Oh," said Leander, and then he didn't say anything.

"It's just that...if I did kill you..." This was a new concept for him, and he was struggling to find words for it. "If I did...you wouldn't be here anymore, ever again. And I wouldn't like that. I wouldn't like it at all."

"Oh," Leander said again. "I wouldn't like it either. Not being here, I mean."

Oberon was waiting, in dread, but it didn't happen again and his heartbeat was normal and breathing was working just fine. He bit one of Leander's fingers, gently, and said, "Do you want to see the rest of it?"

Beyond the vestibule there was a vast hall with a high vaulted ceiling, exactly like a cathedral, with individual displays, each carefully lit.

There were airtight glass cases, with bodies sprawled inside, each in various stages of mutilation and decomposition. "Event art," Oberon told Leander, and the boy laughed at that, so suddenly that it started him coughing, and Oberon had to pound on his back. "Why aren't you scared?" he asked, when the coughing had subsided.

"I don't know. It's like...I always knew there was a place like this. Part of me knows that I should be scared, but I'm just....not. I guess I should be puking or going crazy but I have no desire to do that. You know?"

"Were you always...like this?" Like me?

"I think so," the boy said, after a moment. "I think you're born that way. The first thing I remember in my life--wow, that's incredible," he said, distracted. It was several skeletons wired together into a spider, each leg made of six femurs, and the body a careful assembly of ribcages, the head a human skull with the mouth redesigned, with the long bones from the palm of the hand sharpened and fitted there as fangs. The entire thing was hanging from the ceiling, swaying slightly in a nonexistent breeze.

"You were saying the first thing you remembered," Oberon reminded him.

"Oh yeah." The boy made a nervous laugh. "It's really sick. Of course, here I am in your museum, and I'm embarrassed to tell you this? I think we're both crazy." He thought a moment. "I was in my first year in school. I must have been about four. There was this other kid I hated. I still remember exactly how he looked. I don't know why I hated him, I just did."

His voice got slow and careful. "I don't know where I got the idea. I never got to see or read anything even remotely like it. I think I really was just born like this. I invented this machine...completely in my head, I didn't know the word for machine, but it was sort of like those long things they have in a factory, all chrome and rust and a big warehouse sort of building. Gears and things. And what would happen was I would tie the kid down on this conveyor belt, naked, and once you started the machine there was no way to stop it. And it would pull you through and stick you full of needles. Everywhere."

He sounded like his throat was hurting. "And it was...sexual, I guess. Well, yeah, the...placement of the needles was, uh, very sexual, but the effect it had on me...I would think about it, over and over, until I got every detail perfect, but sometimes I would have to stop thinking about it because of how weird it made me. I would feel like I itched all over. God, I wish I'd known how to jerk off. But I don't think that works when you're that little."

He looked at Oberon, blushing and nervous, and said. "That's the first real memory I have. Before that there's this vague awareness of having lunch and playing with toys and stuff, but that thing I imagined is so much more vivid than any of that. You know?"

Oberon reached up and slipped out one of his UV shields, put it in his mouth to wet it, and slipped it back in. Leander watched this, fascinated. "Next time I want to do that," he said.

Oberon nailed him with an impossible look. "Was it him you wanted to do that to, that kid...or you?"

"Oh, god," Leander said, and covered his face. "You know," he said, muffled behind his hands, "I always consciously thought about it being him, but what would make me so...so frantic...was imagining how it would feel if it were me."

He looked up at Oberon through his fingers. "Don't you dare. I'm still not entirely happy with you about the paddle. If you stick me full of needles I won't speak to you for a month."

That made Oberon laugh so hard he stumbled against a glass case full of severed hands, doubled over, nearly choking.

"It's not funny!" Leander snapped, gesturing angrily.

That made it so much more funny that he was getting a headache, and his eyes were streaming. He reached for Leander, and laid his hand along the boy's face, thinking, nothing but you ever makes me laugh like that, and he gasped out, "Don't ever change."

There were gigantic paintings, some of the canvases thirty feet across, and they were scenes of unimaginable torture. Leander stopped at one, turned his head sideways, leaned his whole body over to try and look at it upside down. "That one is physically impossible," he announced.

"Not if you dislocate the hips, saw through the pelvic bone."

"What about shock?"

"Caule is a chemical genius. Shock is the body's attempt not to have a

heart attack from adrenaline and endorphins--natural painkillers. If you shut down the adrenaline system, use a stimulant along with something that keeps the heart rate normal...you can do anything, unless you destroy the heart or the brain, or they bleed to death."

He's so calm about it, Oberon thought. So matter-of-fact. Just like me. And he wonders about shock at fourteen. What kind of creature will he be at twenty? He smiled at that one, without meaning to.

Leander looked at him through his eyelashes, reading his mind. "I like the way you think." He stopped at another one, tongues nailed in a spiral to a piece of white oak. "Do you ever...regret any of it?"

"When I do it wrong. Or I get too...involved, and do it too quickly. Are you asking me about guilt?"

"I think so. I think that's what I mean."

Oberon shrugged. "What's the point? It's them or me. If I tried not to do it I'd eventually do it anyway. Why be miserable for weeks?"

"It makes you miserable if you don't do it?"

He nodded. "It's an addiction. Once you try it...once someone like us tries it...it's impossible to stop."

Someone like us, Leander thought, and it made him so happy, us. "Do you think..." he began, and he didn't know what he was asking. "If I--"

"Yes. You could. And yes, you would love it." Oberon told him. "And no, you'd never be able to stop."

"What am I to you?" Leander asked, afraid of the answer.

"Lover," Oberon said, pulling him close, pushing his head back, and the boy was looking at the bone spider when he felt Oberon's teeth. "You're my lover. The first one I've ever had."

holy war

They were lying in Oberon's bed, tangled and sticky, and Leander said, "Why children?"

Oberon was licking his finger and tracing designs on the boy's face. "What?"

"Children. Those pictures...I did like them...but I was just wondering why. Why it's always children."

"Why. Hmmm. A lot of reasons. They're tiny. You can hold them down with one hand. They smell wonderful. And they get so frightened, so easily, and they scream so beautifully--and when you...do it, the look on their face, they all get the same look...like they're absolutely disillusioned with reality. Like they just realized it never was okay and it never will seem to be, ever again. Why not? I just like them." He sighed. "One day I want to try every single thing in the Kama Sutra with a little girl, six or seven. It would probably take a few of them, actually. They tend to be so fragile."

"What's a Kama Sutra?"

"An ancient book from Earth with hundreds of sexual variations."

Leander smacked him hard for that one, and Oberon glared at him furiously. "What is wrong with you?" he demanded.

"You wouldn't try them with me?"

"Now, there's an idea--" He lunged at the boy, and Leander squealed and tried to escape, handicapped by a debilitating fit of the giggles. Oberon pinned him, made a mock-ferocious face at him, and said, "Just a few needles?"

Leander was trying desperately not to laugh, and squirming frantically.

"Just one needle, lots of times?" he suggested, nears the boy's ear.

And then something hit the entire room, terribly hard, and Oberon grabbed Leander and flung him to the floor, covering the boy's body with his own invulnerable one, shielding Leander's head with his arms. All the lights went out and things were crashing, glass breaking, and a deep groaning vibration shook the entire Sphere.

"What--" Leander began, petrified.

The alarm went off, terrifically loud, electronic pulse like sonic torture that made Leander scream, struggling to get his hands out from under Oberon to cover his ears, and the red emergency lights came on.

"Someone's shooting at us," Oberon said. It was the same voice he had used to say, kiss him, or I'll break them off, to Camille.

He stood up, his entire body tense, listening. "Someone is fucking shooting at MY SPHERE," he said, in a dangerous whisper.

"Can I get up?" Leander said, nearly crying, his voice tiny. "I'm scared."

Oberon picked him up and put him back on the bed, kissed him hard and fast. "Stay here. Don't leave this room no matter what. That's an order, Leander."

He was groping for clothes, stumbling into leather pants, thick heavy boots studded with metal that laced up to his knee. It happened again, that terrible impact, and another alarm went off in discord with the first, and a voice through unseen speakers began giving some kind of information in an unknown language, and Leander screamed and burst into frightened tears.

Oberon was in a black vinyl undershirt and was working on a black laserplate overshirt. He paused, listening to the PA, and said, "Mother FUCK. Why don't they HAVE them yet?"

Someone was banging on the door, shouting something with the words Septarch and under attack in it, and Oberon shouted back "SHUT UP I already know."

Then he was dressed, and he tied a black silk scarf in his hair to hold it back. He said, "Stay here," one more time to Leander.

Then, he was gone.

Oberon and Theren were moving at military speed down the corridor, trailed by several of the elite guard. "How did they get in?" Oberon

demanded.

"Cut engines. Space suits. Drifted in like garbage, right past the sensors. First thing they powered was weapons."

"They would have gotten caught in the gravity and crashed here."

"I think they knew that," Theren said.

"You got them yet?"

"Just did. Six coming down in transport. Five minutes, maybe ten. Their ship is an absolute piece of shit. It's docked at Moloch."

Moloch was the single artificial moon. "Fuckers," Oberon muttered. "Any idea why?"

Because, you're a fucking intergalactic child molester, why the hell do you think? "Cult. Survivors of Zion 4."

"More survivors?" He grabbed a torch as they passed it, slammed it several times into the wall, sending showers of sparks scattering, before he flung it behind him without looking to see where it went. "This is the second goddamned time THIS YEAR WHY ARE THEY STILL GETTING THROUGH?"

He groped in his pocket, pulled out a tube of red lipstick and slashed it onto his mouth, without looking, smacked his lips together, and threw that over his shoulder too. "Somebody pick that up," he said, as an afterthought, and two guards nearly collided attempting to do so. "Are they all alive?" he asked Theren.

"Not even a scratch."

"The Sphere?"

"Not even a scratch."

"I want the receiving area at forty degrees."

The receiving area. Where prisoners were kept until he decided what to do with them.

He dabbed at his lipstick with his fingertip, glanced at the color,

reached over and smeared it on Theren's bottom lip and pinched his cheek. "Happy...birthday...to me," he said, half-singing, and grinned like a skull.

My God, Theren thought, aching to scrub at his mouth, you'd think we were going to a party.

serendipity

Leander wandered over to the computer, sat down stiff and nervous in Oberon's chair. He was still shaking, and sniffing, and he was furious at being left behind with no idea what was happening.

What if it's a war? What if there are hundreds of soldiers out there? What if he gets killed? He ran his hands through his hair, frantic. How immortal was he? Would a detonator kill him? Ordinary metal bullets? Knives?

The computer screen was prompting him for a password. He typed in his keycode, with little hope of it actually working.

The computer thought about that, and the screen went black and read in crimson letters, HI LEANDER. THE FOLLOWING DATA IS AVAILABLE TO YOU: LIBRARY--TEXT, LIBRARY--AUDIO, LIBRARY-VISUAL, SURVEILLANCE. SELECTION?

Library/visual was tempting, but he chose surveillance.

SEARCH BY LOCATION/PERSON?

He typed PERSON, and when prompted, SEPTARCH.

WORKING, it informed him.

It flashed through a dazzling array of incomprehensible diagrams and schematics, and abruptly gave him video, laser clear, in color. There were six people standing with their backs against a wall, knees bent to the point where they were completely off balance. Five of them were men, in their fifties or sixties. The last one was a girl, with hair like fire. She couldn't have been much older than Leander.

Oberon was there, with Theren beside him. He was saying something,

stroking his chin with the backs of his fingers. He looked amused.

Leander started trying to get audio.

"This is all of them?" Oberon already knew it was. He had other reasons for asking.

"Yes, Septarch. Their ship had no escape pods."

"May I ask why you were shooting at my Sphere?" he asked, looking at one of the men. They were shivering, and trying not to show it. The girl...he didn't look at her yet, but he could smell her. Terror. If he'd looked at her, asked her, she probably would have fainted.

"Because...you're the Devil," the man told him. His teeth were chattering. "You destroyed our homeworld. Millions were slaughtered."

"Oh. That." Oberon nodded. Then he turned to the girl, and just looked at her, and she could feel his eyes and she stared at the floor, her teeth clenched. "What are you doing with them?"

She cringed, and tried to speak, and couldn't.

"What's your name?"

"Felicity," she said, and that was hysterical. He laughed and laughed, and she looked up at him, glaring. Her eyes were the color of her hair.

"Felicity. Happiness. Good fortune. And one of the saints, no less," he explained. She still didn't get it, and he gave up. "How old are you?"

"I...I don't know...I think nineteen," she said.

"And you've come to kill me, is that it? You're their champion?"

She nodded. She was still looking straight into his eyes. That impressed him. He gestured to the guards, and they backed away, weapons down, and he came close to her, closer, and she closed her eyes, pressing back against the wall, and he whispered, "Try."

"I don't...understand..."

He backed away from her, and unbuckled the armored overshirt and pulled it over his head and tossed it to Theren. Then he spread his arms out like Jesus, and said, "Go ahead. Try and kill me. I won't even fight you."

She eyed him, suspicious. He waited. She stepped forward, hesitant, waiting for his guards to shoot her, probably. They didn't move.

She dropped back, and swung at him so fast he almost didn't see her move. Her fist caught him straight in the jaw, and she swung twice more, and he felt the bones crunch near his temple, and his jaw was hanging crooked, and she waited, clutching her hand, watching him. He hadn't moved.

He reached up, examined the damage with his fingertips, and slammed the heel of his hand into his chin, and the hinge clicked back into place. He opened his mouth, closed it, and looked at her, waiting.

Her face crumpled, and she screamed, and dove for the floor, rolling. It fascinated him, and he turned to watch her. She snatched a little hand-held energy gun from one of his guards, and up on one knee she shot him, four times in the chest, from less than ten feet away.

He fell obligingly, and lay without moving or breathing, his eyes wide open. It hurt like absolute hell. He could smell the scorched vinyl of his shirt, could see tendrils of smoke drifting up from his chest. He watched her stand, holding the gun on him in shaking hands, and she heard something behind her, and spun, screaming, and turned back to him, coming towards him, with the gun up and ready.

He sat up, pushed the hair out of his eyes, and said, "Felicity." She was screaming, saying god, god, and she fired again, and this one went wild and burned a black streak in the wall behind him, and then the gun was out of charge, but she kept pulling the trigger, frantically, backing away, until he took the gun out of her hands and dropped it on the floor.

"Repair their ship. Disconnect the controls and set a course for Zion 4, terminating orbit. Do I still have those cases of wine, the 'thirty-eight?"

It took Theren a minute to catch up to all of that. "Yes...I think there's six or seven left."

"Good. Put those on the ship, too, and let them go. Except for her, of course," he added, looking at Felicity.

"You can't," she whispered, not believing it yet. "Zion is a radioactive wasteland--"

He raised his eyebrow at her, and she understood then, and screamed and struck at him, and he grabbed her hands and covered her mouth, screams beating against the palm of his hand. "Stop it," he told her. He said to Theren, "Leave their screens on receive-only. Felicity and I might want to send them something."

green eyed monster

Oberon opened the door to his rooms and was nearly decapitated by whatever it was Leander flung at him. "What--"

"Goddamn you!" Leander was shouting at him. "First I thought you were fucking dead, do you know that? Then I see you look at her like that--"

He said something like you don't understand, but Leander didn't even hear him. He was in a full red rage, now, and there was vicious joy in throwing things, anything. He threw the black absinthe bottle next.

Oberon knocked it out of the air, and black ceramic and leaf-green liquor splattered everywhere, and the smell of wormwood hung in the air like smoke. He lunged at Leander, knocked him over, picked him up and dragged him kicking into the bedroom, put him on the bed and pinned him and snapped, "What is wrong with you?"

Leander burst into tears.

Oberon stared at him, torn between worry and disgust. "I have never seen a boy--or a girl, for that matter--who cries as much as you do. I am fine. The Sphere is fine. They're prisoners now. Everything's all right."

"I know that. I watched on your computer."

"Then what is wrong?"

It took him a minute. He was crying too hard to speak coherently. "I thought you wanted me here. I thought you wanted me to stay here, with you."

Oberon sighed. "You're being irrational. I'm not in the mood for this, Leander."

"You know what? I'm sick of that. I'm sick of how you pretend to be. You're not like that."

"Don't tell me what I'm like. Now stop this, or Cayle will sedate you. I mean it."

"When are you going to kill me?" Leander screamed at him. "You keep me here, and you call me dearest, but I've seen what you do to people you get tired of! Just kill me, all right? I don't want to have to die knowing I was wrong about being important to you--"

You are important to me, Oberon thought.

He tried to slap the boy, but somehow the message got lost between his brain and his hand, and he slammed his hand down on the pillow next to Leander's head. "Stop it," he ordered.

He tried to put his face against Leander's neck, and to his absolute amazement, Leander shoved him away. "Why don't you stop," he snapped. Not very mature, or coherent for that matter, but he was too angry to care.

"Nobody shoves me."

"Yeah? Well, get over it. You don't even want me here and you're going to kill me anyway. I really don't have all that much to lose."

"Why are you acting this way?"

"Why do you want her? Why?"

"Is that what this is about? You think you're being replaced? God, Leander. I kept her for you."

"For...I don't understand."

"I just thought she'd be perfect for your first."

"My first what?"

"Kill. Your first kill," he said.

Thirty pieces of silver

au·toph·a·gy (ô-tòf^le-jê) noun

The process of self-digestion by a cell through the action of enzymes originating within the same cell.

Theren didn't look at her. He'd filled his canteen with vodka and he sat in the hallway outside her cell, positioned so that he'd have to physically get up and walk towards her to see her. He drank, and he was trying not to think.

"Guard?"

"Don't talk to me. Shut the fuck up and sit there. I have nothing to say to you."

"You're not fooling me. I saw your face when he was here. You don't like him."

Oberon. Theren considered suicide briefly. What could it matter? He would drink himself to death eventually anyway. No. Cayle would just give him a new synthetic liver. He could probably look forward to another hundred years of this.

And if you killed yourself, it would never happen again, he would never...

"Are you crazy? Look, there are fucking cameras and microphones everywhere. Watch your mouth."

"He'll kill me anyway. I know that now."

She didn't even sound upset about it. She sounded...serene.

"Yeah? Well, at this point he might at least kill you quick."

"Does he ever?"

He took a long pull, and it scorched his throat, burning up into his sinuses. "Does he ever what?"

"Kill anyone quick?"

If he's said two words to you, then no. By that time it won't be quick. You don't understand. You don't understand how he is, what he is.

"Depends."

"Don't you think he'll kill you, eventually?" she asked him, sounding almost sad.

He got up, and went and looked through the bars at her. "Look. The one thing I have in common with that bastard is that we both hate Neochristians worse than the plague. I don't care if he kills you, and I don't care how. You got that?"

"You're not fooling me," she said again.

The button that electrified the floor she was sitting on was right at the top of the door controls, and for the first time in his career, his hand twitched towards it. She noticed it, and she didn't move, and her expression didn't change. She merely waited.

He couldn't do it, not with her looking at him, not calmly like that, and he said lamely, "You just better shut the fuck up," and turned away from her, too quickly, and raised the canteen to his lips again. It didn't taste like anything this time. He supposed he'd scorched his taste buds into submission.

"He's got a boy," he said to her, over his shoulder. He didn't know why he'd said it. "This boy. He's just a kid. Fourteen. He's just...a kid."

He was looking at her again, and she nodded, listening. "Is it his son?"

Theren laughed at that. "Jesus, no. He's his...no, it's...his whore, I guess. But this kid...he asked me my name, you know that?"

"What is your name?" she asked him.

Right on cue. It wasn't very subtle, or very original, but he decided to let himself fall for it. God only knew why. "Theren."

She nodded, slowly, and said, "Tell me about this boy."

He did. He was fast becoming completely drunk and he was positive he was being incoherent, and he didn't give a damn because she would be dead in a day or so anyway.

Felicity listened, and nodded in all the right places.

"You know what this place is?" he said, finally, gesturing at the entire cellblock. "This is hell. He has rooms full of stuff you would not believe. They took a serial killer and gave him his own fucking planet."

"And you don't want Leander here?"

"Of course I don't," he told her. "It's just...one too many. I can't do it anymore."

"So why don't you take him, and leave?"

Theren sighed, killed the last of the vodka. "He'd kill me. Both of us."

"Didn't you say he would do that anyway?"

"Do you even have any idea what kind of shit I've seen?" he shouted at her. She only listened, her eyes wide, and that made him want to snap her right in half, for having a life that hadn't crossed Oberon's life until now. "He impales people. Puts them in little glass cubes and starves them to death. He films everything, and once a year he piles us all into his goddamn throne room--a throne room, can you believe that? And he makes us watch his favorite films from the past year. Like any of us wanted to see any of it again. Ever."

"So you're telling me he's a monster," she said, softly.

"Yes."

"And what does that make you?"

He looked at her, and he didn't say a word, and she knew she had him.

He opened his mouth to answer her, and his comm beeped at him. He pulled it off his belt, dropped it, picked it up and fumbled it on. "Yes?"

That voice. Like rotting candy. It coiled into the room through the tiny speaker and left coldness and a scent that was as sweet as the smell of gangrene.

"Bring her. Room six. One hour."

He turned it off, looked at her, and said, "I think he's going to, um,

now. I mean...in an hour. You. I mean--"

Felicity nodded to stop him doing that, and said, "At least it's this soon."

Leander watched Oberon turn off the comm, and he said, "I can't do this."

"No? Why not?" He was rifling through a drawer. His hair was a tangled wreck, and his shirt was scorched. He pulled it off and threw it into the fireplace, and the entire room began to reek of burning plastic. "I have to find something to fit you. You don't have any clothes for this yet."

Leander wondered if he'd even heard him. "You're not listening. I can't."

Oberon threw a black shirt and heavy black pants at him. "Put these on. They should just about fit you."

Leander did, still arguing. "I'm too little, and I'll freak or something, and I just can't."

Oberon had replaced his own shirt with a black silk one, passed a mirror and frowned at himself. He picked up a brush and dragged it through his hair. "You know what? What I haven't heard you say yet?"

"What?"

He picked up a lipstick, opened it, and said, "That you don't want to."

"Of course I..." Leander stopped.

Oberon made a face at him with black lips, and said, "See? You can't even say it. Come here."

Leander did. It was harder, standing this close to him.

"What?"

"Do you want to?"

That voice. Leander closed his eyes. A person. A human being. A girl.

That girl.

Fingers, then lips, on his neck, where the cuts were still closing. Breath, on his skin. "Do you want to?"

A girl. A human. Leander nodded, helpless.

Kissing. The taste of lipstick. "You can do anything you want to."

Leander nodded, very slowly. That part, he kind of liked. "And this is your first kill. We have to do this right."

Leander gave up. He submitted to having his face painted--it was sort of interesting, having Oberon do it for him.

He would just refuse to do it. That would have to work. He could kill someone he was angry at, he already knew that, and he could probably even watch Oberon kill someone he wasn't angry at. (Again, he reminded himself, thinking of Jyana.)

But him, doing it? His hands? A girl?

"There." Oberon spread out his arms for Leander's approval. Head to toe black. "Killing clothes."

Fifty minutes passed.

Theren stood up, keyed open the door to Felicity's cell. She stood up, waiting, and she held out her hands for the restraints.

He took her to Room Six, and his mind was an angry blur of single-frame flashes. Oberon's painted face, the lips curling upwards into a cruel triumphant smile. The explosion of pleasure, along every nerve, the first time it had happened, that he had opened his eyes, screaming, unable to understand that he still lived.

Leander, green eyes wide and innocent. What's your name? Are you guarding me from, or guarding me for?

"Yes," he said, without meaning to, and Felicity looked at him strangely. "It's in here," he said sharply, and pushed her to the left, towards a doorway labeled six.

tools of the trade

"Is this it?"

"No. Not yet," Oberon told Leander. "This is where I keep...toys. We have to find the perfect thing."

"Thing?"

Oberon ignored that. "I'm...trusting you, to let you in here," he said, quietly.

He paused, apparently waiting for some kind of answer. Leander didn't know what kind of answer to give him. "I know. It's okay," he said, finally. Apparently it was the right thing to say. Oberon opened the door and led Leander inside.

It was a lunatic's fantasy.

The left-hand wall was lined with whips, chains, pulleys, shackles, manacles, paddles, oiled switches of multiple kinds of wood--implements of punishment of every possible description. There was a separate bondage section of lovingly displayed harnesses, corsets, and straps that defied human anatomy.

Jars of sulfuric acid lined the floor, next to canisters of Earth-police issue mace. There was an antique taser. There was a loop of green garden hose, coiled neatly on a hook like a dead snake. There was leather, vinyl, wire, things that were long skeins of rope studded with glass, shrapnel, and shreds of jagged metal, iron bearings. A cage of white rats the size of terrier pups mewled and scratched in the corner.

"Did you make these?" he asked Oberon. His lips were stiff, and he was freezing and soaked with icy sweat under his clothes. His killing clothes.

"Most of them. Not the rats. That was evolution. Choose something. Or several. Anything you want," Oberon told him. His eyes were half-closed, moving along the walls of tools, and his voice was silky and

adoring. Anything for you, he thought, but he didn't say it out loud.

Facing them was a wall full of the same kind of phallus that had been fitted to Julia's device. These were arranged according to material: metal, wood, vinyl, leather, jade, glass, even some that an art dealer would have called discreetly called ivory. Within these categories they were carefully arranged according to size, from the thickness of a finger to twice as thick as Leander's arm. Some of them were ridged, carved into cruel spirals, or other geometric sculpture infernally designed for bruises, tears, blood.

"Why?" Leander said, his voice clotted. It wasn't what he meant.
"What do...I mean..."

The right-hand wall was lined with every possible tool of physical death. Hanging on steel mounts were swords and knives with myriad edges, some gleaming, some rusted. There were scythes and pliers and claw hammers and crossbows and blowguns and crowbars and saws and clubs. There was a wicked loop of piano wire and there were bottles of poisons, carefully labeled in angular handwriting with crimson ink. Naloxone. LSD. Strychnine. Lye. Others he couldn't begin to decipher.

There were axes. Ice picks. Needles two feet long. Pincers. Blow torches. Enema tubes with copper nozzles and plastic bags of fluid plastered with skull-and-crossbone stickers. Overgrown corkscrews. Clamps and electrodes and batteries and hooks and weights and hedge clippers and a miniature guillotine.

"Oh...my god," Leander said, and then he didn't say anything at all.

Room Six contained two pieces of furniture, both chairs. One was a perfectly ordinary chair, padded and upholstered in a dark burgundy velour.

Across from this was the second chair.

It was chrome and black leather, and it was bristling with restraints. These took up almost all the available space. It was a tiny claustrophobic little booth of a room, painted stark white, freezing cold.

Theren cleared his throat. "Um...you have to..."

Felicity started to sit in the chair that wasn't velvet, and his hand on her arm stopped her. "You have to...take...I mean, you have to take off your clothes," he said, quickly, looking at the floor.

She was still wearing the navy one-piece she'd worn under the space suit, and she unzipped it from neck to waist and pretended her hands weren't shaking. She had to contort to do it without brushing against him. She handed it to him, and there was nowhere to look except the chair, or the floor with its downhill slope and not-so-discreet grating.

She sat down, so he wouldn't have to ask her to. The leather was immediately unbearable, and she closed her eyes and pushed herself back into the chair, and put her arms on the armrests, and settled her feet in the footrests. "Go ahead," she told him, and her voice wasn't shaking. No, it wasn't. Not at all.

He started at her ankles, and he buckled the restraints tight enough to hurt her, and she understood he had to, and she didn't flinch, and she didn't make a sound, because she knew what it would do to him if she did.

He hesitated at the ones around her upper thighs. She waited. He fastened them, blushing and shaking, and did the rest of them with a quickness that had nothing to do with efficiency. He stopped, his fingers against the one that would hold her head tight and motionless against the headrest, and he whispered, "I could let you out. We could go in the hall, and you could attack me, and I could...I could shoot you."

She looked at him, not understanding.

"It's...electrical. Quick."

She still didn't understand.

"It's painless," he whispered, and he started to unbuckle the strap around her chest.

"No."

He stared at her. "Felicity...he'll be angry, but if you hit me, if I'm bleeding, he'll understand--"

"No," she said again.

He looked at her, and he saw she was serious. "You don't know--" he began.

"I do. I do know," she told him.

She'll regret this, half an hour from now, he thought, and he almost told her that, but he knew it wouldn't change her mind, would only be cruelty on his part when half-an-hour from now actually happened. "I'm sorry," he said, all in a rush, and he left before she could say something merciless, like, I forgive you.

He went to Cayle.

Cayle had been quietly offering him sympathy and morphine for two years now, and he had always refused both, until now.

Felicity waited. She noticed the chair had been positioned exactly so that she couldn't look at anything but the door.

Leander reached out, and tugged at one of the phalluses, glittering steel. It was too high for him, and Oberon took it off the wall and handed it to him. He was just looking at it, and he ran his fingers in a circle around the tip.

"Careful," Oberon warned, and he pushed the boy's fingers out of the way and turned a metal band around the base, ninety degrees. The tip unfolded with a spring-loaded click, into four blades.

Leander sucked in his breath.

"It gets better," Oberon told him, with something in his voice like pride, and he turned the band again, and it exploded into an octagon, a jagged evil flower of razor-sharp edges, three times the circumference of the shaft.

Leander was breathing like he'd been running from something. "This one," he said, hoarsely. "This. I want this one." And he ran his finger along the new geography of the tip of it, and it drew immediate blood, and made him gasp.

Oberon turned the band again, and it closed with a snap, like a secret, the seams invisible, the surface polished smooth. "Anything. Anything you want," he said again, and he started to put his hand to his face to hide his smile, but he didn't. There was no one to hide it from, now, and Leander wasn't smiling, not exactly, but his teeth were showing.

terror couple kill colonel

They were walking in a corridor Leander had never seen. There were skeletons nailed to the walls, some dripping shreds of dried skin, their hands wired to hold pairs of torches. One of them had red lipstick smeared across its grinning teeth.

They were passing doors, labeled one, two, three.

Oberon had a leather case in one hand.

They stopped outside a doorway marked six, and Oberon produced a syringe, already loaded, and shot up, and slid to the floor with his back against the wall, and reached up and pulled Leander into his lap. "I didn't use it all. Do you want some?"

"What is it?"

Oberon grinned at him. "It comes from flowers. Guess."

"Will it...damage me?"

"Yes, eventually, but Cayle can replace anything it breaks. It's worth it. Especially for this."

Leander was already rolling up his sleeve.

His black sleeve. His killing clothes.

The needle was different this time. Intense. Oberon was looking straight into his eyes, and he wrapped his hand around the boy's arm instead of a tourniquet, and pushed the needle in too slow and too mean, and tore a deliberate bloody mess before he found the vein. Leander didn't struggle against this inflicted pain. He had learned the trick of suffering was to yield, to stop resisting, and that the sensations that followed were indescribable, addictive.

He leaned his head back, and moaned, and the drug scorched its way up his arm, burning too hot, and too thick, feeling magnetic, as though he wanted to draw his arm and his hand and his fingers tight together.

It hit him like a bolt of electricity, and he gritted his teeth, and went rigid. Oberon was laughing in his ear, biting him, and Leander felt each cell in his neck rupture, and he shoved back against Oberon's teeth. God, it was heaven. "Will it all be like this?"

"Like it's the first thing you ever felt. The first thing that's ever happened to you. Genesis in a syringe."

Leander leaned his head back to look at the door to Room Six. "She's in there, isn't she?"

"Yes."

"I...I'm sort of scared, or something."

"Yes," Oberon said again, and bit at a mouthful of the boy's hair, and dragged it through his teeth. It made a metallic singing sound, like bells, like breaking glass.

"We should have brought some for her."

"No," he said, and stood up, and pulled Leander up with him. "It tends to dull pain."

Pain. "Did you bring it?" he asked, almost frantic.

Oberon patted the leather case, his eyes gleaming. "Ready?"

Leander nodded, slowly.

Oberon opened the door for him with an over-the-top gesture of his

arm, and a mock bow.

They went inside, and the door locked behind them.

Felicity had leaned her head back, as far as she could. Her eyes were closed, and her lips were moving. Some of her red hair was caught under the leather strap across her forehead, and she was naked. Leander stopped in the doorway, startled, staring.

He had never seen a naked woman.

Somehow it wasn't quite what he'd expected. She was so pale, and her skin looked...fake, like rubber, synthetic somehow, too soft and too inefficient. He thought of Oberon's skin, traced with scars like the schematic for a microchip, lean and tense and perfect, and he shook his head, stunned. Different. So different.

There was hair between her legs, a shade darker than that on her head, and there was a blue vein tracing a crooked line on her left breast, just under the skin. Her nipples were stiff with cold, almost as pale as her skin, and he could see her ribs.

It's supposed to turn me on, he thought, and it didn't, and he just kept looking at the blue vein, trying to see if he could see her pulse. He couldn't. He looked at her mouth and her lips, too, were almost blue. He pulled his eyes away. The ceiling was too low, crushing down, and the walls pushed in crooked and heavy.

Oberon took the seat across from her, his knees almost brushing hers. He put his arm around Leander's waist, and pulled him close. "Are you actually praying?" he said, in pretended amazement.

She opened her eyes and gave him a look of pure hate. They were the same color as her hair, and that was interesting. Leander had never seen that before.

He laughed. "How...Christian of you, Felicity," he observed, and Leander knew he was referring to the vicious look, not the prayer.

"I'm not afraid of you," she said clearly. "God is with me."

She's lying, Leander thought, watching her chest, watching her frantic

breathing. She's terrified.

Oberon smacked Leander in the arm, lightly, scaring him badly until he saw the amusement in Oberon's face. "Leander, you didn't tell me God was here. Now, I've gone and given Felicity the best chair."

"Stop it--" she began.

Oberon's eyes narrowed. Leander saw this, and sucked in his breath. Exhilaration. Dread.

The playing was over.

"Don't you think you're a little old to have an imaginary friend?"

Oberon's voice was heavy, cold, and no longer amused.

There were crystals of heroin in Leander's blood, and he felt them melt then, and slam into him at the base of his neck. Oberon felt him tense and rubbed at the middle of his back, without looking away from Felicity.

She stared at them, speechless. She still didn't understand.

"Answer me," he ordered her.

But he's being so gentle, touching me, but when he talks to her, the way he's looking at her...he wondered which was real, but he already knew both were real.

He got a sudden vivid flash of penetration, and his knees went liquid, made him clutch at the arm of the chair, bury his face in Oberon's shoulder to drown out the moan. Oberon ran his nails through Leander's hair, making a tuneless sound under his breath.

Comforting me. Torturing her.

Felicity's face twisted. She didn't have an answer. She took in a deep breath and said, "The fact that we're even here--"

"What? Proves that this friend of yours exists? The fact that you're strapped to a chair with less than an hour to live proves that this god of yours exists?"

Oberon laughed at her, spread out his arms in a crucifixion pose, "All right, Felicity's friend God. Go ahead. Strike me down," he taunted the ceiling. He waited, looking upwards. Then, he looked back at Felicity. "He's certainly taking his time about it," he told her in a confiding whisper. "Don't you hate the sort of people who are always late for everything?"

Leander remembered being on his back suddenly, his knees pushed up, torn inside and bleeding and in exquisite pain, Oberon's fingers in his mouth, choking him.

He's doing this to amuse me. It isn't always like this.

"It doesn't work that way," Felicity was protesting. Her eyes were too bright, her mouth quivering.

Leander felt himself smile like a knife, and he thought, If you cry, it won't even be close to an hour.

"No? Suppose you tell me how it does work."

"His..." She was choking on something. "Plan. If he lets me die here...that's his plan."

"Lets you? Felicity, darling, first of all, nobody lets me do anything." He stopped himself. He was furious under his smile, and Leander could feel it, and he made a noise between a growl and a whimper.

Oberon started stroking his back again immediately, under his shirt this time, and he supposed that was meant to be soothing. It wasn't exactly. "I don't know, dearest, but that sounds like a pretty cowardly way to run a universe. He promises you this, promises you that, but when he betrays you he just tells you it's all part of some plan? Actually, come to think of it, does he ever...really...tell you...anything?"

He was speaking in that slow deliberate way, as if he were carefully choosing each word. He had been taking tiny bites out of her soul, and that last word was a sudden deep snap, Leander could see in his face when he swallowed what he'd torn away.

She's prey, he thought.

"Go on," Oberon said, mocking, daring her, twisting the knife. "Prove to me that he exists, and I'll let you go. Your friends, too. I'll send a

ship to rescue them if you prove God to me."

She screamed at him, and tried to get free, now, twisting and screaming and slamming her entire weight into the restraints.

He was laughing at her. "Tell him to unstrap you, Felicity. Tell him to cave the ceiling in on me. Tell him to kill you right now with a heart attack. Believe me, it would be a mercy."

She looked at Leander then. Until that moment he had been feeling quite invisible, and the fact that she could see him was an uncomfortable shock. He pressed against Oberon's shoulder, oddly frightened.

"He keeps you here," she said, gasping. "He hurts you. Doesn't he?"

He was waiting for Oberon to answer for him, and when that didn't happen Leander turned to him, helpless.

"Tell her," he said, his voice gentle again, his fingers coming up to the boy's face.

"Yes," Leander told her. His voice surprised him. He sounded calm in his own ears, perfectly...happy. "He does."

"But you don't have to stay here," she said.

"Of course he doesn't," Oberon told her, his eyes narrowing even more, into razor wounds, obsidian splinters.

"I want to stay here," Leander's mouth said all by itself.

She made a patronizing, stupid little half-laugh. "You're too young to know that."

His hands sculpted themselves into fists, the fingers closing together like lovers, like pieces of an ancient puzzle.

That was what he hated about them, all of them. Their arrogance. That fucking self-satisfied superiority. Their smug goddamn assumptions that they understood what was best for everybody, and that they couldn't possibly be wrong, not ever.

For the Bible told them so.

You know what? Fuck the Bible.

He was staring at her, and he hated her, fucking hated her, and he didn't have any doubts, not anymore. "What the fuck, you don't know what I want," Leander said, almost shouting, furious. "Don't push me."

That same voice, the one that felt so right in his mouth, on his lips, but it had grown, oh yes, grown so big that it tore something in his throat on the way out.

Shaking.

He turned too quickly, and was about to cry, too angry to keep it in. Oberon leaned in close to him and touched his neck, his shoulders, and whispered, "Should I start?"

"I think we already have," he said back, and it came over him, familiar, that sense of something wonderful happening, something that itched and ached and grew.

"No, I meant, should I, or do you want to?"

He didn't even know where to begin. "You," he said, still too close to tears, immensely and resentfully grateful for Oberon's help.

Oberon stood up, pushed Leander into his seat. "Watch."

Leander nodded. His neck and his throat were tight, and didn't want to move. He closed his hands hard on the armrests. He was afraid they could see it, whatever it was glowing in his head gleaming out like a laser through his eyes.

Born again, he thought, and he raised his hand and covered his mouth, and now he understood why Oberon used that gesture. It was to hold back some new kind of smile that might leave your lips and tongue mangled.

He thought, Septarch. What an ugly, angry, glorious word.

He wanted to pull Oberon close, wrap his hands in that long black hair and kiss him hard, until they were both bleeding, and

He didn't

He couldn't.

He didn't want to interrupt.

Oberon raised his hand, fluttered his fingers to make Felicity look at them, like a stage magician. He kept his eyes on hers and grasped a long iron lever on the side of her chair, rubbed his hand up and down it--all in the wrist—and licked along his teeth, making the gestures deliberately obscene to watch her grimace. He slammed the lever back, and the footrests snapped apart, spreading her legs wide open.

She ground her back against the chair, baring her teeth, and he put his fingers half an inch out of biting distance and said, "You hate me, don't you, Felicity, good fortune, dearest?"

The muscles in her legs were like cords, drawn taut, trying to push her knees together so hard that the flesh around the restraints was pressed burgundy, swollen, bruised.

Her sex was like a wound, little folds of skin wrinkled like scar tissue. She revolted him. Leander hated her, he had never hated anything that much.

There was a division, a vertigo, and he was Oberon, and he felt the lever cold and hard and sexual in his hand, and he was the girl, and the chair was icy leather and the straps hurt him, terrified him, and he was himself, too, and the velour chair was licking at him and the air he was breathing was like a furnace.

Oberon pulled the lever again, outward, and the chair tilted back, not horizontal, just enough to have her looking up at the ceiling. She didn't make a sound, and Leander gasped for her, feeling everything fall, feeling unseen gears under the chair lock into place. Teeth.

"Is he up there?" Oberon asked her, his eyes following hers, and he glanced at Leander like a secret code. Leander gave him back the same silent magic word, and he thought, We are one being, now, one. Him. Me. One being, with one mind.

And one purpose.

Oberon went around behind her, moving liquid and uncanny and

reptilian, and her whole body went rigid, a line from her sternum down her stomach to the gash. She couldn't bear that.

Leander felt her thinking, I can't see him. He drew his knees up in the chair, shuddering with strange sharp excitement. He's going to hurt me, he thought, in delicious panic, and he quickly corrected himself, he's going to hurt her.

Oberon snapped his hands towards her, spreading his fingers out quick with an almost audible sound, as if he were flicking water onto her. Some sixth sense made her cringe, crying out, even though she couldn't see him.

His hands stopped inches from her, under complete control, and he was moving his mouth like a laugh for Leander.

It was their joke, just for them.

Then, Oberon did touch her, just her shoulders, and she tried to push herself down in the chair and couldn't, and her jaw was tight, closed. He ran his fingertips up over her collarbone, up her neck, and he cupped her head, covering her ears, and looked at Leander again, no longer smiling. Watch this, he said without sound.

Leander nodded again.

He moved her hair back, and moved his hands down again, just under her breasts, and he leaned around the headrest of the chair and kissed her shoulder, her neck. She made a sound like a scream that had already faded. The muscles were twisting under her skin in a slow careful seizure.

"She's not being very brave, is she? I'm not even hurting her," he said to Leander, without raising his head. The boy could see Oberon's tongue, tracing hieroglyphs on her skin, his thumbs on her nipples, now, and he put his hand against the scars on his neck to make sure he was breathing.

That's beyond cruel, he thought dimly, and there was electricity tasting his nerves.

Oberon bit suddenly, and she jerked, but he stopped before she could draw breath to scream and came around in front of her again.

There was a pink crescent on her shoulder.

He went down on his knees, between her and Leander, facing her, and Leander slid forward and buried his face against Oberon's back, smelling him, and he rasped his tongue against his shirt in a strange kiss before he leaned back again. He had to see.

Felicity was breathing through her teeth, and Oberon's hands were on her thighs. "You hate me. Don't you?" he asked her again, and he bit her just above her knee, harder this time, and pulled with his teeth until she shrieked, her toes curling hard into the metal footrests.

"You'd better answer him," Leander said, and his voice was coming from somewhere outside the room. She didn't react, but he knew she'd heard him.

She spit at Oberon, then, and it struck in his hair and gleamed there. He found it with his fingers, still biting her, and looked up at her and laughed and spit back, leaving a wet line down her stomach. His hands closed on her thighs harder, moved up to her hips, and she was shuddering away from him, frantic.

He pressed his forehead against the line of spit he'd left on her, just below her navel.

He's going to bite her there. I know he will. I don't know how he can stand to do that. I wonder what it tastes like.

Oberon didn't bite.

Felicity screamed, high-pitched and angry and pleading, and her little hands were in fists now, and she was moving like the chair was electrified.

Leander didn't understand, and he touched the ridge of Oberon's spine, as though he could learn this by osmosis, and when that didn't explain it he looked at Felicity. "What's he doing?"

She was crying all at once, as though she didn't mean to, tears spilling out of her eyes so quickly it didn't look human. "Make him stop," she said, begging, looking at Leander, her eyes shiny and desperate. Her mouth was wet and he was burning with curiosity, and then that voice in his head whispered the word kiss, and he slammed back into the soft chair like he was the one being tortured.

He was laughing. He thought he was. Someone was. It sounded sort of like his own laughter, but he couldn't hear it all that well, because there was a noise like solar wind in his ears and it was so complicated to breathe without choking.

"Is he licking you?" Leander asked her, to see what it would do to her face, and the color that flushed into her cheeks was so funny that he made a noise that hurt his chest and squished his hands against his mouth.

The puncture in the crook of his arm was throbbing like a burn. His face felt strange and he scratched his fingernails down his cheeks and bit his own finger, hard, feeling skin and flesh and bone under all of that, and he could feel what Oberon was feeling, sticky strange and tasting like the palm of someone's hand or the crease of their knee when they'd been sleeping after sex. He could feel what she felt, scorched and helpless and pinned like a butterfly in a dissecting pan. The pain in his finger was stringing all of it together.

He slammed his head back into the chair to make it all slow down, but it was too soft to hurt enough, and he was being sucked in.

There was nothing to hold onto.

He kept his fingers in his mouth and struggled to get his other hand down inside his killing clothes.

"Does it hurt?" he asked her, ragged, around his mouthful of fingers.

She made a snake noise, and seemed to gag over a blunt word.

"Answer him," Oberon said, his mouth against her, his voice clotted and wet. "Answer him, or it will."

"No," she said, sobbing now, her short bitten nails digging into the leather under her hands. Her knuckles were the color of bleached bone. "No, it doesn't...hurt..."

Leander had his heels under him in the seat of the chair, pushing his hips up towards his hand. He scratched at the roof of his mouth, at the back of his tongue. "Do you like it?"

"God help me," she strangled out, and he saw it in her eyes when

something in her broke.

It was the noise of a dog, this time, struck with the tip of a heavy boot, an abrupt harsh predator bird cry, then soft liquid infant noises, then sudden silence. Her head was back, crooked, the pulse in her neck beating obscenely, like an angry fist in her veins.

Her body was rigid, one geometric line from crown to spine to sole, and she left gray scratches in the black leather, and bent like light in an impossible universe, and made a thin brittle wail, and fell back sobbing.

Leander felt it. He knew it , felt it all, and he made all the sounds she didn't.

She started screaming again, panic-stricken.

He is biting her, now.

He felt it close down his spine, into his balls, and he thought, It's heroin. I'm coming pure heroin.

Oberon was leaning with his back against the boy's knees. Like I was sitting with Mom, he thought, and he took his hand sticky with semen and sweat and spread it over Oberon's face, pulling his head back, rubbing his hand on Oberon's mouth, loose and wet now, and no longer painted black.

There was a black feather kiss on Felicity's thigh, and another just above that little nest of dripping auburn hair. Her sex was gleaming, bruised and swollen violet. She was crying thick and heavy and hopeless. Her nose was running, and there was nothing she could do about it, and her chin was inked with red where she'd bitten her lips.

Oberon's tongue was on his hand, tasting his fingers, and he was laughing still, his eyes almost closed, gleaming. Leander wiped the rest of it in Oberon's hair, with her spit. He felt like something radioactive. He tasted his fingers. It was like blood. All three of them, cells wound together in fluid that was warm and colorless.

"Leander."

Everything was red. He thought he was bleeding, and he reached up to his forehead, and discovered his eyes were closed. "No," he

mumbled, to nothing at all, because it was the shortest word he knew.

Oberon took his hand, licked a circle in his palm, and put something heavy and cold there and wrapped Leander's fingers around it.

His eyes opened, and he looked at it.

It was the phallus.

"No, I can't," he whispered, but he was tilting it to see it in the light, to see if it still gleamed like water.

It did.

Oberon was touching him, his shoulders, pulling him to his feet, and he sat in the chair himself and looked hard at Leander, and he reached up and slipped out one of the UV shields and looked at him with bicolor eyes, one night, one chrome. "You can. She's already wet. Just point it towards her heart and push it in. If you time it right she'll come right when you--"

"No," Leander said again. He didn't know what he meant. It was just the only shape his mouth knew.

He looked at Felicity, and she saw what he was holding and he saw her eyes freeze, locked on it, making it her entire reality. "Don't," she said, her voice blurry, pleading.

Something was in his chest, an animal with sharp feet and a gaping mouth. It crawled in a frantic spiral, clawed up towards his throat. He could feel it breathing, could feel its reptile eyes, wide and eager.

It was hungry.

"You don't have to do this," she whispered.

He turned to Oberon, pleading for help, and said, "I don't know if I can."

Oberon didn't look concerned, or angry, or disappointed. His eyes were hot and sharp, driving in, and he said, "You don't have to do anything you don't want to. Not ever again."

Leander made a tiny muffled cry at that.

He wasn't sure he didn't want to.

He wasn't sure.

That thing, in his chest--it was sure, but he wasn't sure if it was his. He thought he wanted it to be.

"Leander," Felicity said, pulling his eyes to hers again, "That voice you hear? Inside you, telling you that you don't want to do this, to be this way? That's the voice of God, Leander. It's the voice of God."

One in front of him, and one behind, tearing him between them. He looked at the device in his hand, a penis of stainless steel with a secret folded inside it, and the trembling started in his toes, and thundered up into his spine and his gut and his throat in a sickening deep rush, like nausea, and his mouth was too wet and his eyes were burning, and he couldn't move.

And then, he could.

Here's your proof of God, he thought.

He turned his head, slowly, and looked at Oberon, and their eyes were fucking, vicious and hard, like a blow, like the business end of a whip, and Leander raised his hand and pointed at his lover, and demanded, "Say my name."

"Leander," Oberon murmured, almost in awe.

He already knew.

Leander turned to Felicity, still pointing behind him with his empty hand, and he said, "Do you hear that?" His words, tight and trembling and laden with tears for an unknown reason. "Do you hear that?"

She nodded. She knew.

"That's the voice of God." he hissed at her, and the animal was free, behind his eyes, wearing his teeth, moving his hands. It was all one liquid motion, and he was on his knees, his eyes in hers, and it was rape even before he slammed it inside her.

She made sounds that were mostly breath, and even those she kept

muffled. Her entire body would jerk, as though he were hitting her, beating her with a hammer, and he moved it in her as deep as he could. There was resistance, and it made him furious, and he leaned against it with his whole weight, and she made an elegant parchment noise, and he realized it wasn't bone he was pushing against, it was flesh, but it still wouldn't go any deeper. He pulled it out, pushed it in again, and he could feel the texture of her through the metal, like rotting meat.

He pulled it upwards, and she made a chest-deep frayed moan, and it was bone this time, that resistance. He did it hard and deep and fast, like his own first time, and he watched her face, and thought about the fact that he could do anything to her, anything he wanted to. It made his hands feel bigger and his teeth feel longer, and he thought, I could rape her, but the idea was sticky and vaguely cold and not at all appealing.

This was more...appropriate. This stabbing, angry motion that hurt his wrist and his fingers and made his heartbeat rage in his head and his throat.

Something changed, the texture of her, the pattern of pressure, and her breathing was like a barbed wire pulled up through her lungs, and he went at it harder, faster, rougher.

It went on forever, and he was making a savage noise he didn't recognize, and it changed again, and it was harder to pull it out, easier to push it in.

She's close.

It made him panic, and he couldn't think, and he cried out to Oberon, "Help me," and Oberon's hands were there, moving it for him, this metal thing like a cock inside her, and he said, "NO," frantic now, and struck Oberon's hands away. "Not that, not--"

The commotion of their struggle was moving it inside her, and he felt it, and it was impossible now to pull it out or push it in, and her cunt closed around it like teeth, and she was making begging cries of regret and remorse, pleasure and shame, and the only words he understood were God and forgive and can't help it.

The shaft of the phallus was slick with fluid from her, and he was crying out at Oberon, furious, for him to help, because he couldn't, it

was too slippery and he couldn't turn the little band, and she was coming and he couldn't--

Oberon's hands closed around his, and pressed Leander's fingers hard enough against the band of metal, and they both turned it. Ninety degrees.

There was a click like a switchblade, mechanical and heartless, and he felt it, oh God he felt it all the way up his arm, the blades snapping out, the impact of it, tearing. Tearing.

She wasn't even screaming after a while. It sounded like a wolf, that noise she was making, Camille said in his brain, and now he understood what a noise like that meant.

Felicity was moving like someone with a head injury, and the sounds ripped out of her were unspeakable.

Oberon understood this, the first, the first kill, and he took his hands away, because the first one had to be done alone.

Leander thought he was hearing his name, spoken like a prayer, but he couldn't be certain.

Felicity suddenly went straight and joints-locked, breaking-point rigid, and the wetness that drenched his hand told him she was coming again, and that made him furious, and he twisted the band himself this time, one hundred and eighty degrees, and that spring-loaded snick of the complex octagon unfolding made him come too, but he didn't really notice it.

It was no longer a human sound, no longer animal, no longer coherent. It was only the sound of breaking, without vocal cords, and he couldn't push it in any deeper, and he was raging, screaming bitch and whore at her, and worse, words he made up for the sake of their music, for their jagged angles

and she stopped coming, stopped moving, and he twisted the phallus, both hands around the slick base of it, twisted the whole goddamn thing in her, and the little wicked blades turned in her, and he felt the tearing like gristle, like wet decayed cloth, and the metallic shattering as one of the delicate evil razors snapped off inside her.

He screamed, still coming, and she wasn't fucking moving, the bitch

and he struck the base of the phallus with the side of his fist, hard, and harder, and as hard as he could. He felt that flesh in her, that had resisted him, and it gave in, now, and he almost lost the thing, it slid in her almost completely, and he thought, who's invisible now?

The beast in him was glutting itself, and his hands were wet up to his elbows, and he kept hitting it, pounding it inside her, the lips of her pussy drawn tight and crimson around the silver edges of it and she was lying there fucking limp and she was ignoring him.

She was ignoring him, IGNORING HIM, and nobody fucking ignored him, not ever again, because he was NOT INVISIBLE, and nobody EVER IGNORED HIM. Not EVER AGAIN.

He pulled at it, and it came out a little way and stuck, and he yanked at it, both hands, and his feet slid out from under him and he braced them against the base of the chair and fucking yanked at it, jerked at it, with his entire body, until a nasty dull hot pain wrenched in his shoulder, exploded in the small of his back, and it wouldn't come out, she had closed her pussy teeth around it and there was a ceramic grating sensation up into his aching wrists, and SHE WOULDN'T FUCKING LET IT GO.

He would show her. Bitch. Whore. Christian fucking syphilitic cunt, he would show her.

He'd shove it down her goddamn throat.

"Leander, Leander," Oberon was saying, and Leander jerked at her again, violent and furious.

"Help me," he was saying, pleading, ordering, shrieking, and Oberon's hands were there, not taking over, not mocking him, only helping him turn the metal band again, forty-five degrees, and the blades snapped closed.

She didn't move.

The goddamned bitch was still ignoring him, and he pulled hard, and it slid out of her, greased and easy, and dropped him on his tailbone.

Rage.

He was standing, and it was in his hand dripping, and he pulled at her head and it didn't work and he clawed at the restraints until they were

loose and shoved it against her mouth and she was STILL ignoring him, and he battered it against her teeth, digging at her mouth, prying at her jaw. Down her throat. She couldn't scream then, it would be a wet broken slippery rattle, and he smashed it into her teeth and

"Leander," someone was saying, and someone grabbed him, holding him, and held him still, and a familiar luscious voice was saying gently, "She's dead, Leander. She's dead. It's over."

And he was clawing at the hands on him, snapping his teeth but he couldn't reach anything, and the hands spun him around and he was nailed by twocolor eyes, and he froze, panting through clenched teeth, and it was over. It was. It was over.

He looked, and the phallus was scarlet, and his hands were scarlet, and his arms too, and something blackred was ground up under his fingernails, and it was still in his hand, and it hadn't been quite able to close completely, because it was clotted with shreds of tissue, and the seams were no longer invisible.

He stared at it, and he thought, She wasn't coming. She was bleeding. She was, she was coming, but what you felt, blood, that was blood.

He stared at it, shaking, and he threw back his head and made a raven noise, a raven at a kill, a lion over a steaming carcass, and he raised it to his mouth and pushed it in, throat deep, gagging, and he pulled it out and crowed again, roared again, and he flung it sidearm and it bang smashed into the wall, so loud, impossibly loud, and it left a red smear where it struck. He looked at Oberon, as though he had never seen him before, his eyes wild.

"It's over. Leander. She's dead," the voice said again, and there were arms around him, warm and gentle, and he bit at flesh and felt it between his teeth, the crisp snap of breaking skin, and Oberon groaned and flinched, but he still held Leander close, whispering, "It's over."

Leander was himself again, after a long bright time, and he was breathing like a victim, and he whispered, "More."

Oberon looked at him, to make sure he was serious, and then he kissed him, carefully, away from the mindless teeth the boy now wore. "All right. More. I know, I know exactly what you need," he said.

"I bit you," Leander said, voice unsteady, and he was crying, vaguely, and he kept looking at the wall, at the red splatter there. It looked like a butterfly.

"I know," Oberon said, and he was holding him again, and he would let him go and change his grasp on the boy and pull him close again.

"She's dead," Leander said, and he could feel her behind him, suddenly monstrous and terrifying, this vast murdered thing, and he clung close to Oberon, frightened. "She's--"

"Yes. She's dead. You did that. You killed her," Oberon said, a soft tuneless litany.

"I didn't mean it," Leander said, his voice going in strange directions.

"Yes you did. You don't have to pretend anything here, don't you know that? You did mean it. Yes you did."

"I want...it was...over so fast...I forgot to notice it and I want to...I wish I could do it over because I didn't do it right..."

"Look. Look at her, Leander, what's left of her."

"No," he said, frantic, but he had already turned his head against Oberon's chest and he was looking at her.

"You did that." Triumph. Pride. Comfort.

She was so white, now, so small and so collapsed somehow, falling inward. She was streaked from thighs to knees with vermilion, and her head was hanging limp, her mouth smashed.

"Do you still want more?"

"Is there more?" he asked like a little boy, small and uncertain.

Oberon laughed, and pulled him towards the door.

Then, there was a red wet blur.

Leander remembered a nail gun in his hand, and a boy only a little

younger than himself with black soft hair and stunned eyes, and the kick of the gun in his hand like a blow in reverse, and Oberon behind him, inside him, whispering, "Eyes. His eyes. Do it in his eyes."

He was lying back, exhausted and the room was dark and so hot, and Oberon was doing something that made a ripping sound, and he took the boy's hands in his own and pushed Leander's hands into a long gaping wound, and there were slick soft things in there that reminded the boy of the texture of his own tongue.

They went through three that night. There would have been more, but Leander finally noticed he'd broken two of his fingers somehow, and the pain started to tunnel its way through the heroin.

Oberon dragged all their kills into the one room, and they lay there on an uneven mattress of limp arms and legs, everything greased with gritty fluid, kissing there in the dark. "I am," Leander was saying, over and over. "I am. I finally am. I never was until now."

"You're what?" Oberon murmured to him, stroking his hurt hand gently.

"Awake. I just woke up. Just now."

Oberon got vaguely offended at that. "It didn't wake you up when I fucked you, that first time?"

Leander laughed. "Not quite, but I never did sleep all that well after that." The needle, in the joint of his arm above his bruised hand.

"Is that sterile?"

"Probably not."

He tried to put his hands through his hair, and he couldn't. Sticky. "How do I feel, right now?" he said, to himself mostly.

"How do you want to feel?"

"Like this. Just like this," he said, finally.

cassius

Theren stared at his computer screen. He had broken no less than six of the Septarch's rules to get the communication code that was blinking now, and his finger was poised over the dial switch, but he couldn't move it. His hand was paralyzed.

The boy, he told himself, his wrist shaking, and he thought of black-green-violet bruises, bleeding, on young flesh, and he thought of Leander looking at Oberon like the bastard was some kind of saint, and he stared at his finger like a man trying to keep an erection by sheer willpower, and it still didn't move.

The coward defeated part of him thought, Rack. Rope. Red-hot irons. Strappado. Rape. Worse. There's always worse.

"The boy," he said out loud, through gritted teeth, and he slammed his finger down, hitting a lot of other keys in the process, but the one that counted beeped at him, and the whirring of invisible voodoo let him know that it was dialing. It was. It was dialing.

It went through elaborate computerized rituals, and then there was the Earth insignia, the general one with the cross and the planet mysteriously still blue despite two years of smog and fallout. "Yes," said the voice through the speaker, already defensive, torn and in terrible pain.

"Paul, please don't hang up. You don't know me. My name is Theren. I want to help you get Leander back."

Silence. Sobbing. "He's alive, I knew he was, I knew they wouldn't have come and taken his things if he was dead, not his clothes, not his hairbrush, they even took his sheets and I couldn't smell him anymore, it was like he never happened, my boy, my son, my only, my son..."

Theren scrubbed at his eyes. His throat was injured. "Sir, please, I want to help you. Please."

"How do I know that?" Paul snapped, suddenly roaring, furious. "You people took my son, and you killed my wife, and how do I know this isn't another fucking game?"

"I can only give you my word," Theren whispered, and he hid his face in his hands, knowing what fragile proof that really was, and he waited for the click of disconnection, and the hiss of interstellar static.

It didn't come.

"I want you to have him back," Theren said into the silence, hoarse and unworthy and desperate. "I don't want him here. He can't stay here. Will you help me?"

Silence. Then a single word, that struck Theren in the base of his skull. "Leander."

"Listen," he said, sharply, too sharply, "This is the plan."

They went over it twice, and Theren sent Paul the necessary data, and disconnected.

He stared into space for a long time, and his hands moved by themselves, dug and searched frantically through his drawers. Not for the vodka. Not this time. Besides, there wasn't any more of it anyway.

He found it, finally, a smooth stack of paper, and a pen, but when he pulled that out and looked at it, it was a crimson fountain pen, and he cursed and threw it over his shoulder and wiped his fingers on his thigh.

Tainted. Evil. Approximate time for clinical death to occur: seventy-six hours, forty-three minutes.

These things, that unholy pen had written.

These things, his polluted hand had written.

He searched again, and found the stub of a plain ordinary graphite pencil, and he pulled that out and swept his desk clear and began to draw, with difficulty. He was no artist.

He made two lines in the shape of a t, a cross, and a circle and stick arms and legs and body, and it wasn't enough, wasn't right, but it would have to be, because it was the best he could do.

He creased the bottom of the drawing slightly, so it would stand up, and he propped it carefully against his screen and the top row of keys.

He looked at it, and that wasn't right, and he stood up and shoved his

chair aside, so hard it fell over.

He knelt on the floor in front of his desk, his elbows on the edge of the table, and folded his hands, awkwardly, looking at his amateur cross.

"God," he said, choking, "God, you don't know me, but my name is Theren. I'm not asking anything for me. I just need your help, so please, please be there, please, and please listen to me."

There was noise, in the hallway, voices and laughter and some kind of commotion.

Theren stood up, his gun already in his hand, and clicked off the safety. He opened his door a crack, and peered out.

It was Oberon, and Leander, playing some kind of game that involved a lot of shoving and laughing and profanity. They would alternately push and pull at each other, and the object seemed to be to get the other person to fall.

Like children, or lovers.

Except that they were both covered in gore, smeared with it, from head to toe.

Theren shut the door. Locked it. He looked at his drawing, and he couldn't even tell what it was meant to be, anymore. Just lines, on paper, and it hadn't meant anything anyway, had it?

He picked it up, crumpled it. Spread it out flat again, and stared at it.

He pushed it off his desk, and closed his eyes.

al·che·my (àl'ke-mê) *noun*

1. A medieval chemical philosophy having as its asserted aims the transmutation of base metals into gold, the discovery of the panacea, and the preparation of the elixir of longevity.
2. A seemingly magical power or process of transmuting: "He wondered by what alchemy it was changed, so that what sickened him one hour, maddened him with hunger the next" (Marjorie K. Rawlings).

[Middle English alkamie, from Old French alquemie, from Medieval Latin

alchymia, from Arabic al-kîmiyâ' : al, the + kîmiyâ', chemistry (from Late Greek khêmeia, khumeia, perhaps from Greek Khêmia, Egypt).]
tree of forbidden knowledge

"Hey."

Oberon made an irritated noise. "Leander, go back to sleep. It's early."

"I want to go back to the Gallery. I'm working on something."

"Coming back when you're done?"

"Yeah."

"Okay, go."

They'd gone to Cayle after they'd finally gotten bored, and he'd splinted Leander's fingers. It was his left hand, and other than hurting in an itchy sort of a way, it was fine. He could still draw.

The Gallery was still empty. No Camille. He'd asked Cayle about it, and he'd explained that she'd had some kind of complete breakdown and had to be constantly watched.

Leander rummaged aimlessly through his bag. It didn't really feel like his cell anymore. It was just where he kept his stuff. There were clothes for him in Oberon's room, now. He didn't know how he felt about that.

He pulled out his journal, flipped through it. He wished he could write a letter and send it back in time to the old Leander, and tell him there wasn't anything wrong with him, he was just living on the wrong damn planet. And he thought, I should write my mom and tell her I'm okay, and then he remembered, and it was like being lost for a minute, confused.

She probably already knew.

She might even have liked it, here. He wasn't sure. He didn't know what she would think, about what he'd done. He thought, maybe she wouldn't exactly approve, but she would understand why I did it.

Why had he done it?

He thought of people who did stupid shit like climbing Mt. Everest, and they'd say, because it's there. Was that why? Or was it something else? People were engineers, teachers, artists, transit drivers, doctors, priests. Why couldn't some people just be killers? They had torturers. Executioners. Soldiers. It was...like being an artist, it was a different kind of art. He sighed. He didn't know how to think about it. He wished he could talk to Oberon about it. Maybe, though, it was the kind of thing you couldn't talk about at all.

Maybe I'm just evil.

He didn't feel evil. He felt hungry and bored and he sort of ached all over, but that was about it. He didn't feel guilty. He wanted to do it again, soon, but maybe not too soon. He wanted to think about it for a while first, and he wanted to wait until he really felt that rage to do it again, because he instinctively knew it was better that way.

That's what the fury is. It's my need to do that, and that's why it hurts, like that, because it's starving it, whatever it is.

So he'd always been this way. He just hadn't known what to do about it.

He flipped to Oberon's letter, read it again. Garden. He could kill some time, that way. He wondered what a garden was like, and he thought of Alice in Wonderland, or something, about talking flowers. Was it like a farm?

Leander turned left, just past the doors into the Gallery. He came to a large pair of double doors, armed with a keypad in the center. He typed in his keycode, and the doors slid open.

He walked through, into Eden.

The scent of flowers nearly overpowered him. It was green, everywhere, and when he knelt and clutched at the ground there was real soil, rich and brown with a warm smell that reminded him of his mother.

He drew in a deep breath, and the air was sweet and clear.

He looked up, and there was a dome, the bright blue of Earth's sky before the wars.

He had never seen a blue sky.

And there were trees.

He had never seen a tree.

He walked up to one, half-afraid.

The trunk was a rough gray-brown, thicker around than he was, and on some level he could sense that it was pulsing with energy. There was emotion coming from it, a welcome, and a complete acceptance of him, and love, no matter what he was, because of what he was.

It has a soul. And so do I. And it knows me, and it loves me anyway--or maybe not even anyway. Maybe it doesn't ask for any excuses.

Maybe there is a God. But not like they think. Not like they want to think.

He reached out, and laid his hand on it, and something happened and he laid his head against it.

He didn't care if he was being watched. He thought, I've never seen a tree, and here it is, in this wasteland. And on Earth, where they say everything is perfect, they can't grow. Too much poison in the air. They have to synthesize oxygen in the air factories, and pump it into the atmosphere, and it tastes of rubber and metal, and it isn't beautiful, not at all.

It was so tall, and robed in leaves the color of his mother's eyes. She's here, he thought, and he heard her, behind him, laughing, and when he turned she wasn't there, and yet she was. She was.

He laughed again, and he reached down and picked a piece of grass, real green grass, not the thin yellow pathetic stuff that grew in the cities of Earth between the cracks in the concrete. He put it to his mouth, and tasted it, and it tasted green, and alive, and pure.

They were growing between him and the entrance. He reached for them, and the scent overwhelmed him like a presence. He broke one

off, and the thorns bit at his bandaged fingers, and he rubbed the blood into the dirt at the base of the bush, as an offering.

He carried his treasure into the hallway, back into the Gallery. And he rolled up his sketch, and tied it with the cord that had cinched his bag closed, and tucked the rose into the black string.

He keyed the red button, and Theren came in.

"Could you take this to him? Please?" Leander asked, and held out the package.

Theren stared at him. Something terribly sad and vast came over his face, but he held out his hand, and said, "Yes."

He took the drawing, and the rose, and went away.

Leander went back to his cell. He began to draw again, and this time it was his mother, in a thick green forest, and she was young, laughing, and the wound was a terrible dream that had never happened.

Oberon was sitting at his desk, with his head buried in his hands. He'd already sent the film of Felicity to the Promise Keeper. After that he'd sent the video of the amusement with Lucius to Jyana's mother, unsent it, changed his mind and sent it again. Now, he was idly paging through ancient pornography from Earth.

He wanted Leander back, wanted to see him and talk to him and ask him what that had been like, his first kill. His own first kill had been a disaster. He'd gotten much better with practice.

He was tempted to send for him, but he knew about being in the middle of something, a painting or a kill or whatever, and there was a coherency, a flow that couldn't be interrupted.

His door chimed.

"What?" he snapped.

Theren came in.

Oberon tapped his fingernail against the screen. A contorted woman in leather and fishnets, with chemical blonde hair. "I want to get a little girl and do her up like this, like a whore, did I ever tell you that?" he asked Theren.

Theren glanced at the screen politely, trying not to grit his teeth. "The boy asked me to give this to you, Lord Septarch." He saw the look leveled at him, and quickly added, "You said...if he required anything..."

"Why didn't he bring it himself?"

"I think...he's working on another sketch, my Lord."

Oberon looked at it. A sheet of sketch paper, bound with black cord, and--

He reached over his desk and snatched the rolled-up sketch out of Theren's hands. "Get out," he ordered.

Theren was gone.

He stared at it. He didn't want to open it.

He pulled the rose out of the black string, held it to his face. It smelled of redemption. Salvation. Joy. And it was as soft as Leander, as soft as he was inside, and just as wet, just as innocent. He licked it, just to make sure. No. It didn't taste the same.

He unrolled the sketch. Himself, angular and elongated and Egyptian, beautiful. The girl, her name had been Jane or Jaina or something, with her tiny hands convulsing into claws. The boy had drawn the instant of penetration.

He's good. He really is, Oberon thought vaguely.

He stared at it, and the drawing began to blur.

He realized his hands were shaking.

He dropped it onto his desk, and fled. The rose was still in his hand, and he either did not notice it, or pretended not to.

The crypt was silent.

Until Oberon came in.

He entered like a storm, surrounded by fury, and he screamed, "WHY AREN'T YOU DEAD?"

He grabbed what was left of Acharis, and he was screaming still, and he struck out, again, and again, until he felt something break in his hand, and he struck out again to make sure he could feel it, and he closed his hands in the corpse and dragged it from the wall, tearing hard enough to make warm dull gushes of pain spread through his back, and he was still screaming.

Why aren't you dead? Why aren't you dead?

He slammed it down, onto the floor, and he was on top of Acharis, screaming still, and it would have been rape, but he couldn't. He couldn't. And he roared in frustration, and smashed at the body again, and again, until it was a flat, brown smear. Parts of it were still wet enough to squish.

Covered in rotting blood, and ancient shit, he stood up, his hands crooked and wounded, and he said, one more time, "Why aren't you dead?"

There was no answer.

"Goddamn you." He stumbled towards the door, but there was something on the floor, a rose, crumpled and bleeding, but still alive, still beautiful.

Little bloody skirt.

He picked it up in his filthy hands, and something was wrong with his eyes, terribly wrong, and he was wounded, and he smeared the blood away from his eyes, but the fluid on his fingers was clear.

Rose. Bleeding. Still alive.

He was wounded.

He fled, following the scent of the only safe place there was, somewhere dark and wet.

The Worm Chamber.

Oberon stood in the doorway, clutching Leander's flower to his chest.

Little bloody skirts.

Something was wrong.

There was a sound. Up high, near the ceiling. A damp, frantic, battering flutter.

He listened, and then he knew what it was, and he slammed the door behind him, pressing the rose against his failing lungs, but it was too late. The sound was inside him. Still. Merciless. Fluttering, beating, furious, innocent.

Nowhere. Nowhere was safe. Not now.

He ran.

Night? It was night? When had that happened?

He struck the first doorway he came to, hard with his broken hands, battering against it, kicking at it, screaming, "Get up!"

There were people, stumbling sleepy and frightened out into the hallway. His guard. Members of his court.

"Get up!" he cried at them, even though it was unnecessary. And Theren was there, and Cayle, holding him, and he pushed them away, and shouted, "Everybody. Everybody UP. Nobody sleeps. Three days. I want all the fucking cameras on, and NOBODY SLEEPS. Nobody. If you sleep, you're dead, you got that? Every living being in the whole fucking SPHERE, you GOT THAT?"

They didn't. They were staring at him, sleepy and angry, contemptuous and resentful. Victoria, with her sewn lips glittering.

Kaden in his steel prosthesis. Both of them groggy and sticky.

"That's your penance."

They still didn't understand.

He just...I could see it in his face, you know. He just hated me. And I didn't even know why.

He was sobbing, and clutching the flower like a talisman. So much space. So many eyes.

"FUCK YOU! YOU HEARD ME!" he screamed, and someone was trying to hold him, saying something, and he struck out again, and heard something break, and he ran and ran, until they were all behind him.

attrition

Leander wasn't in his cell.

Oberon stood there, his hands on the bars, looking over every inch. The bed. The drawing table. There was a sketch there, of a woman in a garden. Eve?

He left. He left me. Did I kill him? I don't remember...

The garden. He'd given him a passcode. Yes.

He stumbled out, to the doorway, and he couldn't remember how to open it, and he banged on it, screaming, "Leander!"

The door opened. Oberon didn't expect it to and he fell into the Garden, and Leander half-caught him, but the Septarch was too heavy for him, and they were tangled on the ground, half in the hallway.

"Why? What's wrong with you? Why did you give me this?" he was sobbing. Sobbing. And he held up the rose like an accusation.

The boy was watching him, and his eyes filled with sympathetic tears. "Don't," he begged. "Don't cry. Please. I thought it would make you happy. I never, ever meant to make you cry. Don't. Don't be mad at

me. Please," he said, incoherent and still begging, and Oberon was clutching at him and pushing his face into the boy's chest, soaking him with tears.

Leander held him, hard and tight. He didn't know what else to do.

"My eyes," Oberon said, his voice jagged and terrified, and he raised one filthy hand to his face. Leander pushed his hand away, and tugged at the hem of his shirt and wiped at Oberon's eyes for him.

"I'm bleeding. They're gone. He took them out. There was a machine and a thing like a claw with hinges and he took them out--"

This last was a hysterical shriek. This was no longer the Emperor of anything. Only a boy, terribly wounded.

"No," Leander said, and he kissed him all over his face, and tried to hold him. He felt too small to embrace pain like that. "Your eyes are fine. You're okay."

"I'm bleeding. I can't see."

"You're crying," Leander told him, crying too. "That's all. You're just crying. I thought...I thought it would make you...happy--"

Oberon noticed that the boy was weeping, and he raised a clumsy hand to Leander's face. "Did he hurt you? Which group are you in? I don't remember you," he whispered. "You're beautiful. What's your name?"

"Leander," the boy said. His heart was breaking. He'd always thought that was garbage they used for poetry, until he felt it happen. It broke like glass and the fragments were ripping him to pieces. "I'm Leander. Nobody hurt me."

"But I killed your mother. You gave me a flower, and I killed your mother..."

"It doesn't matter. I forgive you. It doesn't matter."

"Stay with me," Oberon said, pleading.

"Yes. Always."

He looked at the rose again, holding it between them. "Why did you give this to me?"

The boy didn't know what to say. Why did you ask me to wait?

"I wanted you to know I was thinking about you. That's all. I just wanted you to know."

"Why were you thinking about me?"

"It makes me happy to think about you," Leander whispered.

"Why?" He whispered, not understanding. He tried to stand up, and the boy had to help him. "My eyes. I need a doctor, they're infected, it could spread into my brain," he said, almost hysterical again.

He has no idea what he's doing, Leander thought, terrified. "All right. Come on, it's okay. We'll go see a doctor," Leander told him, and other nonsense, and he got him out the door of the Garden, and Theren and three other guards were waiting there. He was relieved, for just an instant. Thank god, maybe they know what the fuck to do.

Oberon saw them and made a terrified noise. "Don't let them," he pleaded, cringing behind Leander, covering his face. He's afraid of them. He doesn't know who they are. God, what if he stays like this forever? What have I done?

Leander was holding Oberon with one arm, and he looked at Theren and pointed at the gun at his belt. "Give me that," he ordered.

"Leander, you're still a slave, there is no way in hell I can just hand you my gun--"

"Give that to me right fucking now or you will be one sorry motherfucker," Leander snapped, and his eyes didn't waver, not at all. He heard Oberon make a terrified sound, behind him. It was easy. The animal was there, always had been, and he could slip into it any time he wanted to. They knew their place. Prey.

Theren handed it to him, almost immediately, and he clicked off the safety--it was heavier than he'd expected a gun to be--and pointed it at the guards. "Back. Get back. Drop the guns. Now."

They looked at Theren. He nodded, slowly, and three guns hit the

floor.

"You." Leander pointed the blaster at one of them, and the man cringed. "Go get Cayle. Theren, you stay here, and the rest of you get out of here, you got that?"

Oberon was sitting on the floor now, wrapped up small, and the shouting drove a frightened cry out of him.

"Oberon? Look," Leander said, very softly. "It's okay. I've got a gun, see, look. They're leaving. They're going to get you a doctor, all right? Nobody's going to hurt you. Anybody tries anything and I shoot them. Okay?"

Oberon nodded, still crying. "Don't let them," he said again.

There was a crashing bloodlust then, and Leander wanted more than anything to have whoever had done it, whatever it was, in a very small room. Tied down. "Nobody's doing anything to you. I promise."

"He will, when he catches us," Oberon whispered, staring at invisible things.

"Who will?"

"Acharis. When he finds out we tried to escape."

Leander could feel his muscles wanting to shake, and he ground down with all his will and stood there still and tight, like he imagined a soldier would. Acharis. Oberon thought that he and Leander were both prisoners of the first Septarch.

He mouthed at Theren, What's wrong with him?

"The first Septarch. He did things to him you would not believe, and he gets like this sometimes," he said, in a very low voice. Oberon either didn't hear him, or didn't understand.

"After...what, two hundred years?" Leander whispered. His eyes were stinging.

Theren nodded.

Leander winked at him, deliberately, and said louder, "Get on the floor. Put your arms behind you."

Theren did.

Leander made a big show of backing up, the gun trained on Theren, and he sat down beside Oberon and shifted the gun to one hand and pulled him close. Oberon buried his face in Leander's lap, sobbing something about he'll kill us all.

Cayle came around the corner at the end of the corridor in a dead run. Leander snapped the gun on him and he skidded to a stop, his hands up. "What the hell?"

"Theren, get out of here," Leander said.

"Leander, he might hurt himself, or you--"

"No. He won't. I know he won't."

Theren got up with some difficulty, and left, stopping once to look back at them.

Leander had already forgotten him. "Oberon, this is Cayle. Do you remember him? He's a doctor. Will you let him look at you?"

Oberon raised his head, his face streaked with tears. "He might--"

"I'll shoot him if he does," Leander said, looking carefully at Cayle to make sure he understood this game.

Cayle did. He was trying not to smile. He was beginning to think this little slave might actually have a brain.

It took both of them to coax Oberon onto the examining table. Cayle looked at both of his eyes, and said, "I need to put these drops in for you, all right?" Saline, he mouthed at Leander.

Oberon submitted to that, and to the series of injections after that, and soon he was still, breathing deeply, eyes closed.

Cayle made a face at him, wrinkling his nose at the smell. He rummaged around for rubbing alcohol and a cotton cloth. "What on earth is this he's covered with?"

"I don't know. He was like that when he came to me."

Cayle sighed, and started with Oberon's face. "He's a lunatic," he muttered, but his eyes were sad.

"What's wrong with him? Is he crazy, or sick, or something?"

"It just happens, every so often. No one really knows what sets him off."

"Was he always like this, or did whatever happened to him make him this way?"

"When Acharis bought him, he was on the Martian colony. Eighteen years old. He was in prison serving life for murder. A twelve-year-old girl. No, I don't think it made him like this. But it did make it much, much worse."

"You can't fix it," Leander said, flatly, and the shaking was setting in now. He wiped his nose with his sleeve, and sat on his hands.

"I could erase the memories, just like I could remove all these, and give him normal-looking eyes," he said, gesturing at the scars. "He won't let me, and I don't suggest you mention it to him. It makes him furious."

"Will he be all right?"

"He has to sleep it off. He's usually fine when he wakes up. He's broken his hands again," Cayle observed, and did things that made terrible noises, pushed and twisted the bones back into place. "They'll heal by the time he wakes up."

"But there's nothing you could do, so it doesn't...hurt him like this?"

"His hands?" Cayle made a sound that was suspiciously like a snort. "He's used to that. Probably doesn't even feel it."

"That's not what I meant," Leander said, very quietly.

"No. You could help him, maybe, but I doubt it."

"How?"

"Get him to talk about it," said Cayle. He was looking at Oberon with something hidden badly behind his glasses. "It's just that..."

He stopped himself, waved one hand in the air like a man trying to clear away smoke.

Leander was looking at Oberon, too. His hand moved in what was almost a convulsion, and he took Oberon's broken hand in his own. "It's just that what?" he asked, not really curious, or listening.

"That he's nothing like Acharis was," Cayle finished, more to himself than to the boy. "He seems to...do these things to impress himself, in a way. To remind himself that he survived. He's trying to become Acharis, I suppose, but he'll never manage that one. He has too much...potential."

"Is that why? All of this, I mean," Leander said, quietly, motioning with his eyes to indicate the entire Sphere. "To prove something he already did prove?"

Cayle shrugged. "He's insane," he said, abruptly. "I give him too much credit, sometimes. That's all."

That wasn't all, but Leander didn't argue. He felt as though he had all the information to make some kind of connection, but he couldn't see the solution, not even with it right in front of his eyes. He was stroking Oberon's hand, tracing the long chrome nails with his own. Cayle left, without speaking again.

ozymandias

When Oberon woke up he wouldn't talk about anything.

He had them bring him clothes, and he dressed himself slowly, as if he were too sore or too exhausted to move. Leander tried to help him, and he gave the boy a vicious look that started Leander crying again.

"Come with me. I want to go back to my room," he said.

Leander had to help him. He was moving like he was still wounded, and he stopped sometimes, breathing hard, leaning against the wall.

"Please talk to me," Leander said.

"I don't have anything to talk about. I'm sorry I scared you," he muttered. "I want you to go away. To the Gallery, or whatever. I want to be alone."

"I'm not going," Leander told him.

Oberon didn't protest that. He nodded, and whispered, "Fine, whatever."

He's like a zombie. Like he's numb, or just too fucking hurt to care anymore.

In his rooms Oberon lay across his bed and didn't move.

Leander tried to lie down beside him, and he said one word. "No."

It was too much. For him to have been so different, so affectionate and interested and human, and now this. "Don't you think I have a right to know what happened?" Leander cried at him. "Did I do something? Why are you so angry at me?"

"You think I'm angry at you?"

"Yes," Leander told him. Goddamnit, he was still crying. Maybe Cayle could remove his tear ducts. "You won't talk to me, and you won't look at me, and you started this when I gave you that goddamn picture I wish I never drew. What am I supposed to think?"

"On my computer. Use the password Excalibur. There's a series of files called The Experiment."

"What are they?"

"Just watch them," he said dully, pulled a pillow towards him. "Keep the audio down. I don't want to hear them."

Leander nodded, and started to leave the bedroom.

"Wait."

That word. That magic word. Leander stopped.

"In that drawer. Morphine. I don't think I can...would you..."

He did. It was hard to do that, to physically hurt Oberon, even if it was only a needle. He hoped to God he was doing it right.

Oberon reached up, briefly, touched his hair with clumsy fingers. "I'm not angry. I just need to lay here, just for a while."

"Okay," Leander said, even though it wasn't.

He went into the front room, pulled the door to the bedroom closed, but not latched. The statue leered at him as he passed.

He went to the computer, and turned it on.

It prompted him for a password.

After four tries he got up, opened the bedroom door a crack, and whispered, "Are you asleep?"

A soft laugh, then Oberon spelling Excalibur for him.

Leander closed the door as quietly as possible. "Smart ass," he muttered.

It worked. He'd been trying to spell it with a K.

A text window unfolded on the screen.

LEANDER

AFTER YOU WATCH THESE YOU WILL NEVER WANT ME TO TOUCH
YOU AGAIN

Leander bit his lip. He was tempted to get up and go straight into the bedroom and shake Oberon until he told him what in the hell made him think a crazy thing like that.

He clicked next. The film began without introduction.

It was Oberon, sitting strapped into a chair. His hair was pulled back, and he was so thin you could see the bones of his face, his chest. The scars were still open wounds, here, and the eyes--

Leander gagged, and got up and wandered in a crooked circle, his face covered, but he could still see it.

There weren't any eyes.

Black holes, lined with red, the eyelids hanging in loose folds, the flesh around then stark and bruised.

He sat down again, and he thought, If I puke I've got to make sure not to do it on the computer. He made himself watch. Oberon had asked him to do this, and he would do it. Period.

A voice, off camera. "What was that like?"

"I'll kill you," Oberon said, looking at nothing, his voice utterly expressionless, almost too soft to hear. "I'll kill you."

Oh, and he meant it. Leander shivered. He decided he'd rather kill himself with a very dull knife than have Oberon ever, ever say anything to him in that tone of voice.

Acharis, still off camera, said "Do I have to remind you what an acceptable response consists of?"

Oberon shook his head, and mouthed no.

"What was it like?"

"My eyes. Where are they? I want them back."

"Oberon." There was a warning in that faceless voice, and thinly disguised amusement.

"Horrible," Oberon said, and his bound hands tried to gesture, and couldn't, moving in underwater motions, in tiny abbreviated circles. He sobbed once, and blinked the wounds in his face. Leander gagged again, violently.

"Horrible. How eloquent of you." the offscreen demon said, vaguely mocking. "Suppose you tell me which part of it exactly was the most horrible."

"Not...not seeing, what it would do next," Oberon whispered.

That was the least horrible film on the list.

Some unknown control warned him in time, and he actually made it into the hallway and was sick there, leaning against the wall and holding his hair out of the way. There was a new atrocity on the screen when he came back inside. He didn't sit down again. He stood there, his arms around his chest, and he watched until the screen went to static.

No wonder he wants to keep the scars. No wonder he doesn't want new synthetic eyes. He's keeping it like a badge, like when people show off scars from the wars.

He looked at the door to the bedroom for a long time before he went inside.

dissolution

Motion. Pressure.

Oberon stretched out his arms, expecting the texture of the worms.

He reached up and found Leander.

"Now you know," he said. It was over, of course. No one could ever know that and look at him again. The universe didn't work that way.

But Leander was touching him still. Looking at him, still.

He opened his eyes. Leander was sitting on the edge of the bed, crying, dabbing gently at Oberon's face with a damp towel. He dropped the towel on the floor and showed Oberon what he had behind his back.

It was the knife.

Just the sight of it was enough.

Oberon tried to move, to roll away, he's gone crazy, but he was trapped, wound up between his throat and his eyes, too weak to move.

Leander laid it down, on the black silk bedcover, very deliberately, and leaned over and tugged at Oberon's shirt.

Oberon sat up, shaking, still not believing it, and let Leander undress him. He tried to help, and his hands were awkward and uncooperative, and Leander finally pushed his fingers away. He was terribly cold, suddenly, with his shirt off, and he shivered and lay back again, wishing for the blankets.

Leander straddled him, his knees digging into Oberon's ribs, still staring into Oberon's eyes, and the knife was in his hand again.

Oberon wet his lips with his tongue. He meant to say what do you think you're doing?

Instead, he whispered, "What are you going to do?"

Leander moved very slowly, like a dream, and laid the tip of the knife against Oberon's lips. "Shhh," he mouthed, hardly breathing, and he leaned over and kissed him around the blade.

Oberon reached up to put his hands on the boy's back, his shoulders, and the knife pressed harder into his bottom lip, until he put his hands down again. He tried to lick at the boy's mouth, and got the knife instead, cutting the tip of his tongue just enough to sting.

Oh my god.

The taste wound itself through his mouth, liquid electricity, and he could feel it trickling down his chin, along his neck.

Blood.

And it was his own.

He made a thick gritty sound deep in his lungs.

Leander made a tight rough noise at that, kissing harder, until he was bleeding too. And he said, against the knife, "I'm going to unmake you."

He sat up again, trailed the tip of the knife down the tracks the blood had made, left it for a heartless instant against the hollow of Oberon's throat, moved it down to the first thick slash of scar tissue, just along the left side of his collarbone. And he took Oberon's hands in his empty one and moved them up to the headboard.

Iron. The world was a labyrinth of conflicting textures, metal, velvet, and the pressure of the boy against his hips.

Oberon closed his hands around the bars. He opened his mouth to speak, to say Leander or wait or even please. He only took a strange crooked breath and gripped the bars as hard as he could, trying to brace himself. He could not think of a word to express the way this was, the way it felt, this hybrid new emotion. Doomed. Perfect. Inevitable.

The first cut opened like a dark orchid.

He could just see it, if he raised his head. There was only pressure, and a deep cold, then pain as bright as broken glass, fierce, and bigger than he remembered.

He let his head fall back, swallowed a mouthful of blood. It was uncanny, how familiar this was, and yet not familiar. He had never reacted this way...before. Then. And not even later, when it was a machine or some unfortunate slave hurting him at his command. This was different, and yet it had been lying under his skin all along, waiting to happen.

He was breathing in rhythm with the cutting, moving against the knife, as if his flesh was involved in this atrocity, in some obscene relationship with the blade.

That mark was done, and Leander was moving down to the next one.

Not all of them. God, he can't do all of them. I could bleed to death.

But he wouldn't. He knew he wouldn't. Even if he was bled dry, he would survive, still and cold and waiting for Cayle to transfuse him. It had happened before.

But never like this.

The next scar was deeper, thicker, and Leander had to cut over it twice. The knife scraped one of his ribs, and his back arched by itself, sending chemical shudders up his spine, into his teeth.

He took in a breath too rough and huge to keep, and hissed between his teeth, blood scorching his throat. He could hear it. The sound of the cutting. Like scissors through thick wet cloth. Luscious. Gorgeous. And it wasn't cloth, it was those scars, those goddamned hated scars that he kept because of the price he had paid to wear them, and

...and Leander was unmaking them. Erasing them. And the scars that came after wouldn't be the same at all.

He made a liquid choking sound, his mouth still bleeding, and he had learned the trick of it, now. The pain came and went with his heartbeat, no longer cold, and so big it had to be bigger than he was, reaching out into the air, into the invisible mystery of his aura.

And that was only two.

He had hundreds of scars.

"No," he choked out, suddenly afraid--

--and Leander cut him hard and deep and fast, and looked at him with murder in his eyes, and hissed, "Don't."

Something happened like a scream in reverse, deep in his lungs, and he couldn't breathe at all for a horrible instant, could only shudder, his throat quaking.

He couldn't argue with those eyes.

He didn't want to.

He thought, right now, this minute, I'm not the Emperor of anything.

It made some drastic weight vanish, and he could breathe again. He didn't speak. He didn't need to.

He had almost learned to take it, when to breathe, when to grit his teeth, when Leander traced the awful scar down his sternum, along the edge of his ribcage, where it curled in an evil comma along his stomach, the tail cupping his navel, where the skin was soft and laden

with nerves.

"Gag me," he choked out, when the world had faded back into focus. "Please."

Leander looked at him. his green eyes filled with the same calm relentless concentration Oberon saw there whenever the boy was drawing. "Why?"

"Because....I'll scream....."

"So scream," Leander told him, his voice emotionless, but his fingertip suddenly tracing beside that last cut with secret gentleness.

"No," he managed, before he ran out of breath, before he could explain that scream wasn't what he'd meant at all. He only knew that something irrevocable was about to happen, something was about to break inside him that not even Cayle could fix.

Leander was turning him over, moving him easily, and he already knew to shift his hands and keep hold of the bars on the headboard. And the knife was unmaking the hieroglyphs on his back, painting over them with hard, vicious gashes, cutting deeper than the deepest of the original wounds.

He was making an unbearable sound into the black silk pillows, a wet tattered cry that was loud and inelegant and ugly and not a scream.

Not a scream.

And Leander turned him over again, and the slashes on his back were scorching against the sheets, and the silk wasn't soft, not at all, not anymore. It was like lying on gravel, except that it was only his sheets, his black silk sheets, puddled with so much blood.

Leander kissed him again, deeper and almost angry, and laid the blade of the knife across Oberon's tongue and cut him there again.

Then, he pushed him back down on the bed, and pried open his left eye.

Oberon did scream, then, and he tried to move, to fight, and he really had lost enough blood to cripple him, and all he managed was a feeble raising of his hands, a loose wail of terror.

"Hush," Leander said, kissing him again, on his cheekbone, on the exposed flesh of his frightened wide-open eye.

"I can't," he said, sobbing, bleeding.

"Yes," Leander whispered. "You can."

The knife traced around Oberon's eye, cutting around the implant. It snagged the outer corner of his eyelid for an agonizing instant, made a tiny ragged tear--steadied, and moved again, sketching perfectly, leaving a bleeding circle in the dark pink flesh around his eyeball.

The slice was like an acid.

Oberon screamed again, a softer, slower cry that might have been a moan if it was not so weighted with dread.

Leander moved to his other eye,

...blind, I'm blind, and I can't see what it will do next...

made the same cut,

....no, it's not an IT, it's him, it's Leander, and I am not blind, I can see...everything...but everything is red and all I see is Leander...

and pressed a gentle kiss to each shuddering eyelid.

.....over, it's over, it's...

Dimly, he felt Leander's fingertips under his chin, pushing his head back, and the three horizontal cuts across his throat were a pale thin epilogue, the memory of agony.

Whispering: "my favorite...my only favorite..." but he didn't know which of them was saying it.

The tears came then, more red than clear, streaking his face, and Oberon said, "Can I move?"

Leander was rubbing his face against Oberon's neck. He nodded, and Oberon wrapped his arms around the boy and crushed him close, the pressure scorching his wounded chest.

"They're from me, now," Leander was saying, muffled. "All of them. He never happened to you. Only me. The only nightmare you ever had."

"Am I? Your favorite?" The bed was soaked with blood, the room spinning. He held Leander tighter, to make sure he didn't disappear.

"My only favorite. Didn't I mark you?"

"Yes. Yes you did," Oberon said, crying. Something in him shrieked in frustration, a mouth deprived of tongue, and finally closed, and the thin slice of lips scabbed over, and was silent.

And it couldn't breathe anymore. Couldn't whisper lies into his vulnerable ears.

And he felt it die.

Something wet woke him up.

He was in his bed, his own bed, and Leander was dabbing at his wounds with a cold, wet cloth.

"Now you know," he said.

"Did you kill him?" Leander asked him. The boy sounded like he'd been crying for a long time. Oberon touched his face, his hair.

"Yes."

"It didn't help."

"No. No, it didn't."

"Can...can I help?"

This boy. This birdboned boy with his bright eyes and his endless supply of tears, this tiny killer, this boy.

"You already did," Oberon said, very softly. "I hurt. Everywhere. And I can't remember any pain before this one. And I don't want you to go back to the Gallery. Not ever again."

"Oh," Leander said, and then in a plastic cheerful tone, "You know, I tried to wash your hair, but I was getting the bed all wet and the blood is starting to dry and--"

"Leander."

The boy stopped.

"I said I want you to stay here, with me. I don't want you ever in a different room from me, ever again."

"Why did...why did you leave that message?" Leander asked, staring at the stained cloth in his hands. "Why wouldn't I want you to touch me?"

"How could you? After knowing...those things," he said, and that was the best he could manage to say it.

"Those things are part of who you are. I couldn't...knowing why you are this way doesn't change anything. Not the way you think."

"How does it change it?"

"I can't tell you. But it makes something...in me...bigger. It hurts me. But it makes me proud of you. It makes me understand you better."

"I want..." Oberon stopped. He was still weak, sick, and he needed a transfusion, or plasma. He wasn't sure which. But he didn't want to move. "I want more than for you not to go back to the Gallery. I want you to not be my slave, any more."

Leander shook his head, not understanding. "But--"

"Leander. I'm asking you, now. Will you stay with me?"

"Stay with you."

"Yes."

"Not as your slave. Just....stay?"

"Yes," Oberon said again, praying.

"Yes," Leander said, without hesitation. "There isn't anywhere else."

This is home."

Oberon nodded. There was a long, silent conversation. Only the vertigo made him interrupt. "Do you know how to call Cayle?"

Leander grinned. "He's waiting outside. He nearly hit me when I told him what I was going to do. He likes you."

"Cayle? He doesn't like anybody."

"He says."

Oberon gestured towards the door. "Tell him to get Victoria for me."

Leander stopped, suspicious. "Why?"

"Just tell him. I need to talk to her."

the law of the jungle

Light years away, on a ship called the Promise Keeper, five men were arguing. They had gone through three cases of wine. There were four left.

On the viewscreen behind them was the video of Felicity, and Leander. It had been playing for several hours, and none of them noticed it anymore.

For some reason, God had not yet thrown bread to them from heaven. They had spent an hour having a perfectly reasonable, if one-sided, discussion with God, explaining politely and extensively the difficulty this lack of manna was causing them. There was no answer. They had spent the next useless two hours having a drunken theological discussion about the implications of that.

Then, the subject had changed, rather abruptly.

Now, they were arguing over which of them would be the one to be killed and eaten.

The final consensus was an improvised method of drawing straws.

The theory was that this would let God decide.

synchronicity

Two weeks passed.

Leander's belongings were moved into Oberon's rooms. His sketch of Jyana's rape hung beside his Messiah, both over the fireplace, with a skull and crossed femurs in the middle, carefully painted by both of them with elaborate hieroglyphs.

The bones had once belonged to Felicity.

The rest of her was given to Lucius.

Camille returned to the Gallery. She spent her days sedated, and sang into the empty room.

Sixteen days after Leander's first kill, a ship crept into orbit around Omega-7-18. It ghosted the moon, and devices bought with credits provided electronically by Theren kept it invisible.

This was not the plan.

Oh my God.

Theren stared at the message in horror. It didn't go away.

He dialed furiously, and when the invisible ship accepted his comm he hissed, "Are you fucking crazy? This isn't how I told you to do this! You were supposed to stay completely out of the system! What part of that had to do with next to fucking Moloch?"

"It'll work," said Paul. "Just bring him. I'll run, and you decoy. It's safer this way. How do I know he wouldn't nail both of you before you even left orbit?"

"I am not believing this," Theren whispered. "If I had gotten him that

far out they'd have taken so much longer to find out--"

The alarms went off.

"Shit," said Theren, half a second after Paul said the same thing.

Oberon came into his room--their room--in an absolute fury.

Leander looked up from a rough sketch. "What is it?"

"Security just arrested your father."

"What?"

He had to have misheard that.

"On Earth?"

"No, here, in orbit around my planet," Oberon snapped. He collapsed into one of the leather chairs and sat chewing one of his long nails.

The boy was white, bleached. It was possibly bad, possibly so bad. But...Oberon didn't seem angry..."Did you...are you?"

Oberon looked at him, understood what he was failing to ask. "No, Leander, of course not. Come here."

Leander did, freezing cold. Why in the hell would he come here? What is going on? I can't, I don't want, I...

"I'm going to keep him a week or so, scare the fuck out of him, and give him a ship with a better chance of not blowing up in his face than the piece of shit he had. I'll send him to Trell 3. It's a colony that fled Earth during the first war. They're No-Techs. Farming or something. No crime rate. No religion shoved down your throat. No poison count."

Leander buried his face in Oberon's shoulder. "I don't want to see him. I don't want him here."

"All right, dearest. Whatever you want," Oberon told him.

Leander clung to him. A nightmare future of Earth was blinding him. To go back to that, after this. He couldn't. He'd kill himself. He didn't want to see his father. That was over, all of it. It had never happened.

"You're shaking," Oberon whispered to him, tracing lines on the boy's chest. "Nothing's going to happen. You're mine."

"I want to stay here. I don't want to see him. Can't you send him right now?"

"As soon as they have the ship ready. No more than two days. All right?"

"I guess," Leander whispered. Wrist units. Poison count. Masks. God help him, school and church and prisons and that required little sermon you had to key in and listen to twice a day. No more museum of blood and pain, no more garden with real trees, no more kissing and scratching and Oberon with long black hair and electric eyes.

Gray. Fences. Rules.

"Not Earth. Never again," he said, still shaking.

"Now what?"

Paul looked up. He was sitting in the same cell Felicity had been in, but a bed and a chair had been added, and little control panel that sent electricity into the floor had been deactivated. "Are you Theren?"

"Yes," Theren said, irritably. "He's going to send you to Trell 3."

Paul blinked. "They don't accept outsiders--"

"He already talked to them about it. They'd be happy to have you. They're working on irrigation, and they need an engineer."

"I don't understand. People on Earth would kill to go there. It's a paradise. I thought he was this...killer."

"He is. He never does anything unless he gets something back. What he's getting back for this is Leander."

"Leander? I.."

"His gratitude," Theren snapped. He constructed a sentence to follow that, looked at Paul's tortured face, and edited it considerably. "His continued...compliance."

Paul heard it anyway, the unspoken atrocities veiled in those three words. He drew in his breath, and thought of Soren on their wedding day, and said while pretending to be brave, "There has to be a way."

Theren took a deep breath. "There is."

Paul closed his hands around the bars. Soren. Smiles, and gentle easy touches, like affection was some actual part of normal human arousal, in spite of, no, in deliberate defiance of the teachings of the state.

Woman. A woman that had defied all the church's promises. To marry is better than to burn. Marry. With her, married was deja vu...already seen. God help him, he had married her the minute he had looked into her eyes and known. Here was a woman that was more than a woman. A being. A being that would be his other half. A woman that had nothing to do with original sin, a woman that was born and built and had come to him pure.

Kisses. Kisses that tasted of Earth before the wars, flowers, rain, rain that was only water with no comprehension of poison. And a woman. A woman who was gone, gone, and all that remained of her was in Leander's eyes.

"Tell me."

"It will probably get us all killed."

"Tell me," Paul said again, desperate and insistent and a vigilante, all in one breath.

Leander was in the Garden, drawing his tree. He'd named it Soren. He talked to it, sometimes, and that was all right because no one ever came into the Garden except for him anyway. He'd confessed that to Oberon, and he'd gotten a strange look on his face and said, "Maybe she lives there now. That makes a lot more sense than heaven."

"I almost said it again today," he told Soren, sketching lightly with a brown pencil. "But I don't know what he'd do. What if he laughed? Or worse. He might freak like he did when I gave him the rose. But what if he said it back?"

The tree paused, apparently contemplating this.

"You know what? You don't talk back very much," Leander told it. "Just because of that, you are nothing like my mother. But that's okay," he offered, quickly. It was almost an apology. "I know you're probably trying," he began.

What would she say? Probably, quit being such a coward. He'll never know unless you tell him. And you know what else? He won't laugh. I bet you he won't. And no, I'm not angry that you...

"Leander," said Theren behind him.

Leander flipped his paper over quickly, looked over his shoulder. "Hi."

"Is there someone here? You were talking--"

"I was talking to myself," he said, blushing. Jesus. How much had Theren heard?

He studied him, trying to get a clue from his face.

Something was wrong. Theren wasn't wearing the violet armor. He was dressed in a gray one-piece thing that looked kind of like a flight suit. "What is it?"

"It's Oberon," Theren told him. It wasn't exactly a lie. "I need you to come with me, right now. It's important."

Leander set his sketch aside, stood up, pale and worried. "Where is he? Is he sick again?"

"Just come with me," Theren said, and he took the boy's arm and rushed him into the corridor.

His sketch lay on the grass, behind them, branches without leaves, etched in lines that looked like skeleton hands.

That was too easy, Theren thought.

"I've never been here before. Where are we going?"

"Hurry," Theren said, ignoring that. They were almost running now, and the vast double doors slid open in front of them, and they were in one of the launch bays, and Leander saw Paul standing beside a sleek black ship twice the size of an electrocar, and he shrieked.

He turned on Theren so fast and so savagely that he damn near got away. Theren grabbed him, and Leander kicked him hard, screaming, and hit him twice in the face, and Theren pinned his hands and picked him up, and he heard Leander's teeth snap together twice, and he was squirming like a snake, and growling.

"Let me the fuck GO, I will kill you BOTH, LET ME GO!" he shouted, and then he screamed, "HELP! GUARD! OBERON I'M IN HERE AND THEY'RE GOING TO--"

Theren let him go, spun him around and hit him in the back of his head with the handle of his gun. Leander made a noise that ended too quickly, and he would have fallen, but Theren picked him up and shoved him towards Paul, and snapped, "Every fucking microphone in the place just heard that, go, now, hurry the fuck up!"

Paul took his son, without a word, and they were in the ship and the ceiling slid open, and the engines flung them into the orange sky with a sound like a scream.

He put Leander in the little space behind the cockpit, on a narrow bunk. He was more or less unconscious, frowning, his mouth moving without sound. Paul touched his face, his hair, crushed him close in one silent hug. There would be time for more, later. He stumbled up into the front and sat next to Theren. "What now?"

"Now we fly as fast as I fucking can and hope to God we get enough time to hide someplace."

"Run? That's your plan, to run like hell?"

"Yes."

Through the window the sky deepened to crimson, then black, and

Moloch glittered like a skull before they passed it, and there were stars.

"You should go check on Leander. I hit him pretty hard," Theren said, without taking his eyes from the controls.

Leander was awake. He sat with his back up against the metal wall and he stared at his father with hell behind his eyes.

Paul tried to speak. It wasn't all that easy, and all he could manage was, "Leander--"

"He'll come for me," Leander said, very quietly. "When he does we'll kill you both."

Paul's eyes were burning, and a sound like a plea came out of his mouth, and he dragged in a deep breath that went solid on him and scorched his lungs. "What did he do to you?"

"Do?" He shook his head, slowly, and he put his hand over the scars on his neck. My favorite, my only favorite. "You have no idea. About anything. You're a complete fucking idiot and you will never, NEVER UNDERSTAND WHAT YOU'VE JUST DONE!"

He stopped it as soon as it had begun. No. Not now. Not here.

Not yet.

"Leander, it's okay," he said, voice uneven and structurally flawed, weak in places, collapsing. "Whatever it is, I'll get you the help you need. They can deprogram you, and--"

"Deprogram me? The help I need?" He said these things like the obscenities they were, and then he laughed. It wasn't a boy's laugh. "Fuck you. You think you're helping me?"

"Leander, I came here to save you," he pleaded.

"Whatever made you think I wanted to be saved?" the boy whispered, shuddering, and he turned his face away.

"I'm your father," he said, desperate now, and he put his hand on

Leander's shoulder. "You belong with me."

"I belong with him." Leander opened his eyes and looked at Paul's hand with furious contempt. "You're my father? Let me tell you a story, father, about exactly when you stopped being my father. I came home, one day, and I took my pants off and showed you bruises like no kid should ever have. I was crying. And you know what you did? You fucking patted me, patted my shoulder right where you're touching now, and you said I should have been more careful about what I drew."

The last few words of that were in a strangled, enraged hiss. Paul took his hand away. "Leander, I know I could have...I can make it up to you, all those things--"

"No. You can't. Especially not THIS. And I don't even want you to fucking try. Take me back now, and I'll make sure he lets you go."

"I can't do that," said Paul in an ugly low gasp.

Leander thought about that, shrugged. "It's your funeral."

Paul went back and sat next to Theren, because that was the only other room on the ship. He strapped himself into the chair, and stared out at the stars. They were little blurs and streaks, instead of specks, and he had to reach up to his face to figure out why.

Theren cleared his throat. "You okay?"

Paul choked, and whispered, "He's so...different."

black hole

Oberon woke up, reached out his arms. The bed was cold. And empty.

He stumbled into the front room. His computer was on. The message read: IN THE GARDEN. BACK SOON. KISSES, LEANDER.

It had been put there fourteen hours earlier.

He shoved the chair out of the way, already typing with one hand. He went to SURVEILLANCE/ PERSON/ LEANDER.

The computer considered, and flashed the worst sentence he had ever read: THAT INDIVIDUAL IS NOT PRESENT WITHIN SENSOR RANGE.

He dragged the chair over, sat down, chewing his fingers. He ran the diagnostic. No problems. Working fine. He typed THEREN.

THAT INDIVIDUAL IS NOT PRESENT WITHIN SENSOR RANGE.

Click. That was two, two pieces of something inside him that were broken and rattling now. He was cold. He was getting colder.

He typed SURVEILLANCE/ LOCATION/ WING 8/ CELL 3.

The video clicked on obediently.

Paul's cell was empty.

His hands. Shaking. The room was clicking in and out of focus, his eyes adjusting by themselves, running through all possible visual ranges in rapid sequence. He typed: DEPARTURE LOG.

One ship. Three passengers. Thirteen hours ago.

He left me. He left me.

Oberon screamed, and he swept the entire computer off the table, and there were sparks, and smoke and he was running, running, into the lift, down to the control room, into the heart of the Sphere.

Earth.

Again.

Leander curled up small and pulled up his shirt. It was one of Oberon's, and he was swimming in it, and he sniffed hard at it, trying to wrap himself up in that mildew-and-myrrh smell.

What if he didn't come?

Earth. Again. Blank fat pale human faces. An endless scavenger hunt for drugs, forbidden books, underground games. He'd been trying to feed the fury with those pathetic substitutes, and now, now that he knew, now that he'd tasted reality, how could he go back to that?

He wished he'd said it. He should have. He might not get to, now. And Oberon would never know.

"What would you do?" he whispered, to his lover, so far away that his mind couldn't conceive of the distance. "What would you do?"

That voice spoke in his head. Familiar. Casual and dark and like velvet clotted with blood.

He listened. After it was finished he got up and took off Oberon's shirt and stretched it between his hands and spun it the way you did a towel, into a rope, and he tied knots in it, until he had a black silk garrote.

He wanted it to be his father, more than anything, but logic wouldn't let him do it that way. He knew his father had less of a chance against him, and Paul couldn't fly as well as Theren could, probably couldn't fly a ship like this one at all.

He took a series of long deep breaths. Calm. Quiet. Frenzy would be fatal, now.

The voice whispered one phrase, and he smiled and reached down and took off his boots. He walked up to the door in sock feet, the shirt already between his hands, and opened it, holding his breath. It didn't make a sound.

Theren.

There was a short little corridor, and he walked carefully, each step rolling soundlessly from heel to toe, and he had the shirt up, and he could see them, and they didn't hear him. Neither of them even moved.

He dropped his weapon over Theren's head, and pulled as hard as he could.

Paul was shouting something, and Leander kicked at him, and it hurt

the hell out of his foot, and Paul stumbled and struck the controls, and the ship jerked and jolted, and Leander slipped. No traction, in socks, on a metal floor.

He fell, screaming in rage, and then they had him.

Oberon dragged his finger along rows of keys, toggling them all on. He threw back the lever, and terrible pressure smashed into him, and there was a ripping sound like the entire planet was being torn in half, as the Sphere tore its way through rock that had been magma when it had settled there, three hundred years ago. He couldn't hear himself sobbing anymore.

The sky on the monitors went from orange, to crimson, to black.

They'd fucking tied him. To the bunk. With his shirt. His feet were knotted together with some kind of packing tape.

He wasn't thinking, wasn't moving. His mind was a fierce litany of unimaginable torture, and underneath it all were the words, he'll come for me.

"Shit."

"What?" Paul said, startled out of light uneasy sleep. "What is it?"

"If there's anything you want to say to Leander, you'd better say it now."

Panic. Deep cold fear closing in a place in him so deep he hadn't known it existed. "Why?"

Theren tapped the monitor for the sensors. "See that thing the size of a goddamn planet?"

Paul looked, squinting. "What is that?"

Theren sighed. He pulled a canteen off his belt. The last of the vodka,

stolen just before their idiotic kidnapping. "That's the Sphere. He launched the whole fucking Sphere."

Behind them, from the bunk Leander was tied to, came a terrible crowing shriek. "I told you he would come..."

almost always fatal

The guards didn't speak to any of them. Theren and Paul were led away, and Leander was escorted to the throne room in silence.

Oberon was there, not on his throne, just standing in the middle of the room, with his back to Leander. "Leave him."

They did.

Leander, still shirtless, still in sock feet. He was waiting to be caught up in a furious embrace, kissed, held, everything, anything.

Oberon didn't move.

"Oberon? I knew, I knew you would--"

He went to him, put his hand up on Oberon's shoulder, smelling mildew, myrrh, blood, hair like silk, straight as rain against his fingers.

The Septarch turned to him, and his face was a mask of darkness and fury.

Leander had time to take a single breath. There was one word, beating in his throat, but before he said it Oberon hit him.

Something cracked in his face, near his nose, and there was a wet gush of something that tasted like salt and piss, and he would have fallen, but Oberon grabbed him, and hit him again. And again. And again.

The room went from orange, to red, to black. This time there were no stars.

He looked up at his lover, crumpled and broken, and he tried to raise up his hand, still waiting to be caught up in a furious embrace. Kissed. He didn't understand. He wasn't even sure what had happened.

Now I know, what it would feel like, for him to hit me, really hit me.

It was horrible, and worse, it was all twisted up inside him, grief and terror and hunger and deep hard sexual fury, and none of it was pleasure, because under it all was that difference, that terrible difference in his eyes, black ink eyes, and there was nothing there but anger, not anymore.

He thought he was Oberon, suddenly, and he tried to reach up, to his eyes, to feel the gaping holes there, and a voice was following him down, still dark, but stretched and agonized, no longer casual, not at all, and damp with tears.

"How could you?" Oberon whispered.

He opened his mouth to answer, and there was nothing.

ophelia

Dizzy. Pain. Spinning.

He was in the Gallery. Yes. The smell, the sense of space was familiar. His hands would go up to his face, now, and his eyes were there, but so swollen they almost wouldn't open.

The word was still there. He tried to say it and his mouth wouldn't open the way it used to, and when he tried again there was a crunch that went all the way up into his skull.

Leander wanted to get up. He had to. He would key open the door and go to Oberon's room, somehow, he would get there, he would crawl there if he had to. Someone had hurt him. Oberon had to know, he would want to know about it. He had to get up.

He managed to sit up, on his bed, and he almost fell, but he managed to turn and his back struck the stone wall behind his bed, and it hurt like crazy, but he stayed sitting up.

The door into the Gallery opened.

He knew it was Oberon. He just knew. He couldn't see all that well, but he knew.

He came in, slowly, walking like a figure in a dream, and he stopped almost at Leander's cell and looked at him through the black UV shields, and there was no expression on his face, no angle to those full painted lips, no emotion in those synthetic eyes.

He was dressed in black. Killing clothes.

Camille was lying on her bed, sprawled and drugged, in a sweaty still tangle of white silk and red-gold hair.

He looked at Leander through the bars, coldly, for a long moment, before he keyed open the door to Camille's cell.

No, Leander thought. He wanted to look away, but his head wouldn't move, and his eyes wouldn't move. Trapped. He was trapped in his body. Couldn't you have kissed me, just once, before you hit me?

Oberon picked up Camille, with one hand, and she was still asleep when he began kissing her, arms and legs hanging loose like a doll, like a corpse. She made a muffled noise, and her hand struck out at the air, then reached up and closed over his shoulder, moved clumsily through his hair.

He was kissing her still, his jaw moving like he was biting her, and she moaned and it was like electricity moved through her body, and her arms wound around him, and her legs came up and closed around his waist, and when his mouth moved to her neck she whispered, drugged, "I knew, I knew you'd come back. I knew you wanted me. I knew you did."

Leander's teeth were rattling together, and he thought the bed was shaking, the wall, the floor, the entire fucking Sphere. It's a game. He's furious at me, God knows why but he is and he's just doing that to hurt me, he doesn't really want her, this is a GAME god help me it HAS TO BE A GAME...

He could hear them kissing. It was a sticky wet sound like a wound being pulled open.

He remembered hearing that when it was just them. That first time,

that first kiss. This is the kind of work you'll be doing. Being in Oberon's lap, his knees under him, hard and scary and wonderful. New. Knew.

Oberon laid Camille on the bed, tore open the shapeless white silk that covered her. She spread her arms out, growling deep in her throat. Her breasts were bigger than Felicity's, with no ugly blue veins, only a crooked scar from her collarbone across her right breast, disappearing along her ribcage. Oberon ran his fingers along her nipples, and they folded tight like the lips of a carnivorous plant.

Camille says you eat little kids.

The museum. Oberon pinning him, teasing him, Just one needle, lots of times?

In the hallway, slick with Felicity's blood, shoving and pulling at each other, laughing.

The memories were holograms with forgotten faces and stunned eyes, fluttering down in a technicolor blizzard, into a bottomless pit.

No, Leander thought, and he wanted to scream out in agony, and everything, all of it, all that he had ever held as precious was being torn away, and he didn't even know why.

I should have said it. I should have said it. Even if he'd laughed, at least he would have known.

Oberon pushed Camille's knees up, and his hand was fumbling at the waistband of his pants, and he managed it, finally, and freed an erection the color of a bone-deep bruise. He spread her sex open with his fingers, hard enough to make her cry out, and his eyes found Leander's when he slammed it into her.

But she isn't like you. She's nothing like you. I'm like you, me, just me. I'm like you.

He was fucking her. Her. Camille. And he was kissing her cheek, her mouth, with lips that had said, There is no Camille.

Leander could hear that, too, like the sound of kissing, but more slippery, more violent, and the smacking of flesh against flesh, and he made a desperate sound of sorrow that nobody heard. He put his

hands against his mouth, to hold it in, and he thought of his first kill, of watching Oberon with her, Felicity, and he had put his hands on himself, happy and fierce and hungry, and it was gone, all gone, all of it, and he didn't even know why.

Both of them. Moving together like animals, like water, an impact repeated over and over again. Camille, making a vicious hungry sound, like sobbing, without tears, and Oberon silent except for his breath, hissing bright and harsh and quick through too tight a space, and his eyes driving into Leander's like a dull blade, the antithesis of light. Hopeless. Merciless.

Confetti, in the shape of butterflies, each one etched with a looped cross. He'd looked up the symbol. Ankh. Ancient Egyptian: water, life, mirror. Immortality.

And the arrow, down, he didn't need to look up. He knew.

Camille was making a rough angry sound, her mouth opening and closing like a fish, and Oberon was still silent, breathing hard, grinding against her and staring at Leander. Then his breathing stopped, and he drew her close, hard, into an obscene geometric arc.

He's coming. In her, in her, Camille. Her, he thought, numb, but hurting too much to be numb, watching those black eyes narrow into crescents, watching Oberon's lips twist into something that should have been passionate but was only ugly.

Camille was silent, now, his hand over her mouth, only her fist striking the bed in pleasure. The arc collapsed, and he pulled away from her and stood up, and dressed himself. She was squirming on the bed, sticky and gasping, and she held her hand up to him, and he drew it to his lips for a medieval kiss, still looking at Leander.

And he smiled.

Oh god, Leander thought.

Oberon grasped her arm, still holding her hand, and he started twisting. She made a little cry, thinking he was only playing, and then the first snap, and she screamed.

Leander made a sound that was almost a gag, and fumbled his hand up to his mouth and pressed the base of his thumb against his lips. He

couldn't risk drawing attention to himself. God knew what was about to happen, but it was better that it happen to her than him.

He broke her wrist. All right. That's all. He just broke her wrist, he was babbling to himself, insanely. He'll probably beat the hell out of her or something, god knows why, god knows, and WHEN EXACTLY will this start to have something to do with me?

His ribs started aching, suddenly. Probably broken, too, and that brittle wet noise had reminded them of it.

Leander was breathing in water. Boiling water. It was swishing in and out of his lungs, and his brain and his teeth and his stomach were having a terrified conversation, and Oberon was not stopping with her wrist.

He twisted her hand all the way around, and the skin of her wrist wrinkled and darkened and finally split, and there was a liquid grating scrape. And he went to her elbow, and that didn't take quite as long, one quick jerk, and there was bone gleaming white and startled through her skin.

He couldn't hear her. Leander could tell by her face that she was shrieking, could see her feet slamming useless and spastic against the foot of the bed, but he couldn't hear her. He could only hear what Oberon was doing to her.

He broke her shoulder.

Jesus Christ, he's going to tear off her arm.

He didn't.

He just moved to her other arm.

This already does have to do with you, the voice in his head told him, sounding flat and drugged and defeated.

Oberon's hair had swung forward, into his eyes, and he reached up and tucked it behind his ear, the gesture casual and familiar, and it left a red stripe on his forehead. Still no expression, except a vague atmosphere of attention, of concentration, and after each fracture he would look up at Leander, to make sure he was still watching.

Leander was almost positive she was dead by the time Oberon made it to her hip. That was the worst, absolutely, worse than anything he had ever seen. Oberon braced his foot between her legs, the heel of his boot against her pelvic bone, and he had one hand around the back of her knee and one around her ankle, and he threw his entire weight into the pull. It was like a gunshot, that sound, and Leander could see, actually see the bone slip out of the socket under her flesh.

He had to pull twice to dislocate the other one.

Then he realized he'd forgotten her fingers, and he broke all of those, calmly, methodically, and dropped each hand when he was finished, and they left red dashes on the white bed, the fingers at crooked, crazed angles.

He pulled her up, finally, and broke her neck, and let her fall. He stepped back, looked at her, pushed his hair back again and drew in a deep breath, still calm, but his hands were shaking.

Then, he grabbed her, picked her up in sudden violence and slammed her spine across his knee, and the sound was like a rock against a windowpane, and when he threw her down she was completely the wrong shape, entirely the wrong shape, she was absolutely the wrong fucking shape.

She looked like someone had folded her, and tried to smooth her out again without success.

He gave Leander one more long look, and he turned and left the Gallery without a word.

Leander stared at her, paralyzed. He finally realized he was still breathing, and he whispered, "Camille?"

despair

The corridors were tactfully empty.

Someone standing behind any of the doors would have heard a glassy, scraping sound, like a ragged bell, and a dark drunken voice singing the words to an ancient rock song from some forgotten planet, very

softly.

"Laughed at his long black hair.....his animal grace.....It was all right...the band was all together..."

Oberon couldn't remember the words. Not all of them. The song had been on one of Leander's discs. Someone with a bright fragile androgynous voice, and he didn't want to go in his room, but he wanted to hear the song, goddamnit, so he would just fucking have to sing it.

The scraping was the bottle. It had been half full of absinthe. He'd topped that off with vodka and what was left of Felicity's blood. Shaken, not stirred. And shaken messily, at that. He was dragging it along the wall to accompany himself.

"Lady Stardust...sang her songs...of darkness and disgrace..."

He couldn't remember any more. Something about someone named Blue Jean. A stage. Stage fright. Fright night. Night owl. Screech owl.

Spaceships and gas masks and bright shiny stun guns.

God, he needed more heroin.

His stash was in his room.

He didn't want to go in his room.

He would never go in his room again.

Not with the cyborg Jesus, staring down at him, benevolent, electrical. Not with himself staring out of that hell with Jyana under him on her back. Not with that bed, there, still smelling like a boy with green curious eyes.

He looked at his hand, for some reason. Blood. He thought dimly, oh shit, I'm bleeding, and he poured some of the bottle's contents on his hand, and that liquid was a nameless color that didn't help any at all.

It didn't matter.

He would set it on fire. Yes. He would set his room on fire. Actually, the hell with it, he would set the whole fucking Sphere on fire.

After it was finished, anyway.

He sang and scraped his way to a room with a locked door. There was blood and absinthe on his chin. He'd stopped singing because he'd discovered he couldn't think of anything that rhymed with decapitate except mutilate and he'd already used that one.

He didn't have the key, and he muttered, "Key," to himself, and kicked the door in, damn near dropping the bottle in the process. The kick itself was easy. It only took one to cave in the door. He'd have to thank Cayle for the adjustment to his mechanical knees before he exploded the Sphere.

There was a smear on one of his UV shields.

He took it out, put it in his mouth, put it back in his eye. That was much worse, between the blood all over it and the fucking alcohol burning like crazy. He took it out again, put it in his mouth, remembered that hadn't helped, and spit the damn thing out in frustration.

Crimson light painted him bloody.

He finished off the bottle, threw it sidearm out into the hall. The crash was wonderful.

He couldn't carry it anyway.

For this, he would need both hands.

auto-da-fe

"You know, did I ever tell you, last year in school, I wrote this essay?"

Leander was talking to Camille. Since her death she had become a lot easier to talk to, and her replies were a hell of a lot less schizoid.

He had no idea how long it had been. A day, maybe. No one had come in. Her skin had started to look funny and sometimes he thought he could smell her, and he would stop in the middle of whatever story it

was and sit sniffing, terrified, but he never could be sure if the smell was really there, or if he was imagining it.

"So I wrote this essay, on a poem by this guy named Yeats." He pronounced it to rhyme with beets instead of dates. "It was...It was about the Antichrist. I loved it. My teacher didn't. I got two weeks of detention, and an F on the paper."

"I used to have the whole thing memorized, but...I can't tell it to you, because...I haven't been feeling all that well, lately."

That was the understatement of the year. His whole body was stiff, and ached in ways that made the room go gray every so often. He was hot and cold simultaneously, and sometimes he got this weird feeling, like he was the bed and he wanted to get off of it, because he was crushing himself. His fever was so high he didn't realize he had one.

"But...all I remember...is something about a strange beast, slouching towards Bethlehem to be born. That's the last line, I think, and that's all I remember. This past...day...that keeps rattling around in my head, you know? Slouching. And...it seems to mean something, like, something really important, but I can't quite figure out...remember..."

His voice trailed off.

A metallic rattle, a scrape. Very very faint. He thought of a ghost in a burial shroud, dragging chains. His voice was too faint to be a whisper. "Camille there is this noise a noise outside outside the Gallery and it is getting closer..." he said, all in one breath.

She didn't answer.

Tears stung at his eyes, suddenly. "No more," he whispered, but not to her. To everything. No more of this, no more talking to a corpse, no more broken ribs, no more. This game wasn't a game anymore, and he was pretty sure he wasn't winning, and never had been.

"You already broke most of them, it shouldn't take as long as it did for her," he whispered bitterly, to no one at all.

The noise.

It was right outside, now.

He knew it was Oberon before the door even opened. Just like before. He knew.

Then he saw what the noise was, what Oberon was dragging behind him, and he pushed with his feet, sliding in the sheets, until he was pressed up against the corner of the wall. He wasn't shaking. He couldn't. Oh, he thought, with no emotion at all.

Oberon was dragging the device. The device to be fitted.

He stopped in front of the door to Leander's cell, still looking at him with his eyes like ice. One of his black lenses was missing, and his face was streaked with dark fluid.

He dropped the device. It clattered on the stone floor. He keyed in the code without looking, and swung open the bars.

He didn't move.

God damn it, I don't care anymore, Leander told himself, and his jaw got tight and hard with something that he wished was defiance, but it wasn't. He was still in his black pants, the rest of his clothes who knew where, and he struggled with the snap and the zipper and pulled them off, and he didn't take his eyes from Oberon. So there, he thought, and there were insects crawling up his throat, and he couldn't choke them back.

Oberon didn't react at all, but Leander thought he saw the iris of his synthetic eye dilate for a microsecond.

He didn't care. There was no point. He could see in the coldness of his face that there was no hope of reason, of mercy. If he resisted, there would only be more pain.

He only looked up at Oberon, and prayed his eyes could say...something. Anything. Everything.

Oberon picked up the pieces of his device, dropped them on the bed beside Leander. He flinched, and his eyes cringed closed against his will, and he could not look up again.

He felt Oberon take his arms and raise them up, over his head, and he kept them there, and the corset closed around him, from just under his arms to just below his hips. He tried to brace himself, and Oberon

pulled the first of the straps tight and fastened it, moving down and securing each one with inhuman efficiency.

At first, it actually made his ribs feel better. Then, Leander felt Oberon move to the other side, tightening something there, too, and there were bands of agony across his lungs, and the terror was immediate. He couldn't breathe. He had to force himself to take calm, shallow breaths. He couldn't afford to panic.

Why not? It's not like you have anything to lose, now. Don't you understand this yet? He's going to kill you. It doesn't matter if you can breathe.

Kill him. It didn't seem to apply to him, somehow. He was only fourteen. You didn't die at fourteen. That wasn't how it worked.

Except that it was. Oberon was going to kill him.

Maybe he would just scare him. Put most of it on him, and leave him, or something. Anything. If only he knew why he was so angry.

Oberon snapped the collar around Leander's neck, tightened the little screw in the back. Leander leaned his head forwards to let him do it. It was just tight enough to constrict his throat, just tight enough to make it one step harder to breathe.

He wanted to say it. One word. It was risking more pain and he had just remembered that he was an absolute coward. He didn't say anything. Breathing had become a complex process, and if he spent energy on thinking he would suffocate.

Oberon was kneeling by the bed, now, and Leander could feel his eyes, and he looked up, the iron biting into his neck, and just as he did Oberon looked away and picked up the headpiece.

It'll be all right, Leander. He's a monster, but at least he's beautiful.

It started then.

Panic.

He remembered, in a thick vivid flash, his head in Oberon's lap, Oberon's cock in his mouth, deep and luscious, and it wasn't the first time--it was later, after Felicity's execution. Oberon had gotten violent

on him, had grabbed his head and choked him, semen spilling into his throat, and he had strangled, the stuff scorching his lungs, and he had been absolutely unable to breathe for a terrifying moment, and everything, every thread in Oberon's shirt, every angle of the stones of the floor had become vastly and terribly important, and bright enough to blind him.

It was like that now.

You can't, he wanted to scream out, and he tried to draw in breath to do it, and the iron across his throat, his ribs stopped him, drove out the breath he had never meant to take, and he was gasping, and Oberon's hands were bringing the band up, and he twisted, he thought he was, but it was really only a slight, convulsive jerk.

The band closed around his forehead, the tiny hooks dangling on their springs cold against his cheek like malevolent jewelry.

Oberon was drawing it tighter, tighter, and he could feel it bruising, could feel the fusion deep surreal pain of it pressing against his skull, and he tried to struggle again, and again it was only a weak uncertain motion of his head.

Am I just sitting here? Goddamnit, am I just SITTING HERE LETTING HIM KILL ME?

He was. He was doing just that.

Mom, he thought, suddenly small, suddenly pleading.

She was there. She said only, Look.

He saw Oberon, saying, I want you to stay here, with me. I don't want you ever in a different room from me, ever again.

He meant that. I know he did. I could see it in his eyes.

The image changed. Oberon, touching his face, his fingers gentle and frightened and compassionate, whispering secrets of pain and pleasure and isolation.

He meant that, Leander told himself, breaking. He did. I will believe that he did. I WILL BELIEVE.

The rest of the headpiece. The little part that curled along your jawbone, to the horrible piece that...

Oberon was holding it in his hands, and Leander fell, over onto his back, and it strangled him, the impact, the collar, the corset, choking, and he prayed and prayed, and there was some kind of God, because the word was still there.

"Wait," he rasped out, desperate, one hand trembling in the air with frightened fingers, begging.

Oberon looked down at him, one eye black, one eye silver...

...and he waited.

Leander's hands stumbled in the air, fingers closing and opening at the wrong moment, like a broken machine, but he managed it, he gritted his teeth and forced his eyes to focus and he managed it, he did, and that was all that mattered.

He took the mouthpiece out of his lover's hands. Tears were searing at his wounded eyes.

And Oberon waited.

"I love you," Leander whispered.

Oberon didn't move. He was wearing the mask, still—but there were cracks. They ran in merciless angular lines from those synthetic eyes, down Oberon's neck, into his shirt, and disappeared somewhere in the left side of his chest, black and forbidden and bleeding nameless fluid.

Leander saw them. He pretended for the sake of Oberon's dignity that they were only a hallucination.

Leander opened his mouth, and pushed the terrible bit in himself. He reached to the little button with heartbroken fingers and pressed it, and the iron snapped open, springloaded, merciless, forcing his jaw wide open, sending broken-glass pain shattering up into his skull.

For you. I'm doing this for you.

He could only think these words. He couldn't say them. He was mute,

now. He had already said the only words that mattered.

Oberon hadn't moved to stop him.

And he hadn't answered.

Leander didn't close his eyes, but it was the same as if he had, and it was only a second, a second, but he decided, and he thought again, I will believe, and every tense and torn muscle in him relaxed.

He submitted.

He won't kill me. He loves me. And I won't fight him.

He couldn't see. His eyes were open, but he couldn't see. And he heard Oberon take two short, quick, hard breaths, and he almost had hope. Almost.

And he heard it. Then. The metallic thick rattle of the belt of the device, the belt with its dreaded phallus.

It was so difficult. His jaw was aching already, strained to breaking, and the taste of rust was gagging him, and he was cold, freezing cold.

Leander caught one blurry glimpse of the belt in Oberon's hands, and he closed his eyes and drew up his knees, and let his hands fall, palms up, fingers open.

He felt small, so small. He pushed his hips up, and the belt closed around his waist, cold as ice, too hard, and it closed with a switchblade click.

The phallus was lying on the bed beside his hand. He curled his fingers, to feel it against his knuckles, and then Oberon picked it up.

The tip of it was against him, pushing hard. It was cold, too, everything was. Everything was frozen, and he thought, it won't hurt, it just won't, it's not that much bigger than-

Jesus God it did, it hurt like nothing had ever hurt, scraping up into him, and there was a bright ragged ripping agony, and deep hard pain that made his legs convulse, drawing up hard, his feet drawing jagged lines in the air.

Oberon was pushing it in deeper, leaning into it, forcing it in, and there was flesh resisting him, and he slammed his hand into it, like Leander had done to Felicity, and Leander couldn't help it. He screamed.

He was trying with every muscle in his body, every inch of his spine to push it out. He couldn't. The bit was forcing his mouth open, stretching his lips wide, making his scream edgeless and hideous.

It was turned wrong, the little metal loop at the end of the phallus and Oberon twisted it in him, and drew the strap through it, and put it through the waistpiece of the belt and buckled it tight. The pain was a spiral with rows and rows of teeth, snarling in him, winding him tight.

It's over, Leander heard from somewhere, and he opened his eyes, and Oberon's fingers were on his eyelids, and he was fumbling with the tiny little hooks on the headpiece.

They weren't meant to go under your eyelids.

They were meant to go through them.

It was a crimson blur, and then Leander's eyes were held wide open, and they would try to blink in reflex, tears pouring down his face, and the hooks through his eyelids would tug, tearing, and green blinding flashes would shatter across his vision. He barely felt it, the final pieces, braces that held his arms straight at his sides, his legs straight and pressed together.

Oberon was standing over him, now, looking down at him, and why hadn't he noticed him, really noticed him before. His hair wasn't black. It was black and blue and green and violet and red, the color of the back of your eyelids in a dark room.

He would never see that again, the backs of his eyelids.

His eyes. Eyes like moon and night, that might collapse into an eclipse at any moment.

Oberon was turning away from him. Leaving.

Leander made a desperate frantic awkward motion, lurching forward with all his weight, iron scraping. Oberon turned back to him, whispered, "What? Haven't you finished looking at me yet?"

Leander made a low brittle sound.

"You left me," Oberon said, in something less than a whisper, like a scream at low volume. "I hope it takes you weeks to die."

He thinks I...that isn't...can't...I have to tell him...

Oberon was gone, out of his line of vision, and he heard the door into the Gallery open and close, and he was still struggling, and he managed to roll off the bed. The stone floor struck him without mercy, and he heard a hundred delicate things in his face, his neck, snapping and tearing, and the room went as bright as if it had been electroplated, blurred, then folded into a single, angry white line.

exit

rap-ture (ràp¹cher) noun

1. *The state of being transported by a lofty emotion; ecstasy.*
2. *Often raptures . An expression of ecstatic feeling. See synonyms at ecstasy.*
3. *The transporting of a person from one place to another, especially to heaven.*

verb, transitive

rap-tured, rap-turing, rap-tures

Oberon programmed the platform to a setting he had never used before, not in all his two hundred years in the Sphere. The gears groaned and whined in metallic protest, then finally submitted with a scraping jerk.

The platform rose, until it was sixty feet above the worm-infested floor.

He sat on the edge of it, his feet dangling.

A fall of sixty feet wouldn't even come close to killing him. But it would break most of his bones. He would probably even die eventually, if no one found him.

He lay back, feet hanging over one side, hair hanging over the other. He could hear them, above him, rustling, beating frantic and desperate at the dome of the ceiling. The air was as black as ink, damp against his face, and he could not see them moving in it, but he knew they were there. He could smell them, like tea leaves, like dust exposed to sunlight. A warm brown smell, light and sweet and absolutely horrible.

After a long time, he made his platform descend again, and took the walkway back into the Sphere.

There was so much to do, and he was beginning to think there might be so little time.

It was an effort to move. There was grit and blood grinding in his joints. His muscles were sprung and weary, and he had to keep blinking to see through them, the ghosts, crowding him with pleading mouths, accusing eyes. He could almost feel them, now, tiny

transparent fingers plucking at the ruin of his clothes, the ends of his hair.

Not his hands, of course. Never his hands.

(one boy used to he used to he wasn't afraid of your hands he fell asleep with your fingers in his mouth, he would chew wet circles into your clothes and touch your face and all those scars like you were a mystery)

He bit through his bottom lip, felt his teeth grate together.

(a puzzle box that only he could open)

He was unplugging synapses, rebalancing delicate systems of neurochemicals, and soon, if he survived the process, the boy would have never existed.

(an inscription in hieroglyphics that he could interpret if he repeated it enough times)

That was what he told himself, anyway.

He was walking towards the dungeons. He was sick to death and he hated himself and this was work, now, not art, not self-expression, not anything he could ever enjoy. This was only work, and he was being forced to do it, and he hated absolutely everything, himself most of all.

He watched Theren in the monitor for a long time. He was chained, suspended almost vertical, leaning forward slightly, with his arms up and twisted back like an interrupted swan dive. He was blindfolded, and his face was set in lines of pretended calm, with sudden tension in his mouth, his jaw, betraying his terror.

Oberon was angry, rage boiling up in him, but it didn't have the bright wonderful taste it once had. It was like the memory of an emotion. He felt like he was following a script, acting out the life of someone who no longer lived.

(the boy if you go to him now there is, there is still time)

Something was buzzing in his ears, the premonition of a headache. He shook his head, violently, tasting his own hair, and what had happened to his lip?

He scratched at his head, violently, digging his nails into his scalp until he drew long stinging lines. That didn't work and he struck his forehead with the heel of his hand, hard, over and over until vertigo drowned the voice into silence. He was saying a name as he did so, but the sound of his hand striking his skull drowned out the sound, and he didn't even know he had spoken. His mouth kept moving, but the punishment had stunned his vocal cords into submission, and there was no voice behind it, only his bitten lips shaping a word that no longer had any meaning.

There were no magic words. Revenge, maybe, but unless you had a goddamned time machine and you could stop...it...from happening at all, no torture would equal what this one, Theren, deserved for his betrayal.

Judas kiss.

The fucking bastard.

He couldn't ever hurt him enough. He wouldn't even try.

He could just shoot him.

No. Despair was one thing, but...his reputation. It was all he had left.

He would just improvise something. He was sure that Theren would be impressed, whatever he did. He would make sure it was messy and merciless, with lots of blood and screaming, and when it was over he would go to his...a new room, and he would order his old room sealed forever, and he would drug himself into a stupor so that he would not have to

(think about the boy)

dream anything.

He opened the door to Theren's cell, and forced himself to grin, with lots of smeared teeth showing. Inside, his lips were making new ugly lines, but the mask was still working.

For now.

Theren's entire body changed, the minute Oberon stepped into the cell. There was instant tension, and resistance against the restraints, without actual motion, just a tight frantic contraction of all of his muscles, and the blinding magenta scent of fear was almost nauseating in the confines of the tiny room.

Theren was hanging from the ceiling, against the wall of the cell, strapped in a complex arrangement of chains and leather cuffs that had been designed with aesthetics in mind.

Oberon didn't have aesthetics in mind now.

I could eat him. It's been a while since I did that, since I taught Lucius how to do it. That would serve him right. He tried to devour me. He found the softest part of me and tore it out with those flat small human teeth, when I almost trusted him.

Yes. That would be perfect. It might even make him feel better, the bright human taste, blood made thin and sharp with adrenaline, skin salted with sweat.

"I know it's you," Theren choked out, the chain around his neck constricting his words. "Please. I know you'll kill me. Please, I have to..."

Oberon moved in, feeling like an animal, feeling his breath draw in the scent like a chemical skein drawing him in to feed. He didn't care what this meat had to say.

The stomach was tempting, yes, the long line from sternum to navel, the agitated muscles winding tight there. No. Too quick.

He pinched the soft exposed flesh at the back of Theren's left arm. He smiled, and said in a slow cold drizzle of a voice, "Do you know...how much it hurts to be bitten.....really bitten. You should. After all, you bit me."

Theren tried to shake his head, frozen.

"Didn't you...bite me...that hand that feeds you..."

"Wait! For god's sake...you know he said that to you...I'm saying that to you for him, please, WAIT..."

Oberon buried his teeth in skin, bit hard and deep in that place where there were so many nerves, until his teeth came together, and he pulled his head back like a scavenger bird, the scream drowning out the wet gristle tearing sound. Then, he waited, not because he was moved, but because he was chewing. He wasn't really listening. He didn't care.

"I don't care...what you do to me...but Leander, he had nothing to do with this, it wasn't his idea, he screamed for us to take him back...I swear to you, Septarch, he never wanted to leave you...we had to force him, to hit him, and he tried to kill us both to get back to you...please, God, if he isn't dead yet, don't hurt him. He had nothing to do with it."

This was an incoherent, tearful confession. It was vaguely interesting. Oberon chewed hard. There was a word in there somewhere that meant something, and he was trying to remember which one it had been. "Leander?" he mumbled, just barely curious, around a mouthful of flesh.

"Yes! Yes, Leander. Don't hurt him. He didn't want to go. Do you even fucking hear me?" Theren was screaming, now.

Oberon licked at his mouth, hysteria clouding the words, but that one word, still.

"He didn't want to go!" Theren was shrieking, again.

"Didn't. Want to. Leander?"

"NO! NO HE DIDN'T WANT TO FUCKING GO!!!"

Oberon thought about that. It was difficult, going from berserk to rational, and part of him could smell the blood, the fear, and he wanted to eat first and ask questions later.

He leaned closer, opened his mouth again. The smell. Blood. But something stopped him. There was soft, warm, cringing flesh, just in reach of his mouth, but some goddamned word, a word like a soft

kiss, like breath in darkness, was stopping him.

Leander.

He had some kind of thought to express, and it had to do with rationality, and reason, and justification, but it took him a long time to crush all that into two words, "Prove it."

Theren hadn't expected that. Oberon watched him, frozen and bound in a moment of gasping panic, and he almost began to eat again when Theren choked out, "The logs! The ship we took, it was one of yours, and you have that goddamn surveillance shit on every fucking thing you OWN, and the logs recorded everything, everything Leander said and did...you have to pull the logs! If I've lied you can do anything, I don't care, but you can't kill him for my mistake, you can't, you just can't..."

This dissolved into sobbing again, but the necessary words were there. Logs. Proof. And a boy, something about a soft vicious boy...

Oberon reached up, unhooked the supporting chain through the single pulley, dropped Theren onto the floor. "You come with me," he rasped. "If you're lying, you'll wish I would just fucking kill you."

Theren nodded.

"I will give you to my court, do you understand?"

Theren nodded again, on his hands and knees, the blindfold clinging to his eyes in wet black silk circles.

Oberon sat in the control room, with Theren beside him, kneeling, and shaking in agony.

He listened to the logs, these voices without faces, again and again.

He'll come for me. When he does, we'll kill you both...You have no idea. About anything. You're a complete fucking idiot and you will never, NEVER UNDERSTAND WHAT YOU'VE JUST DONE!...and you said I should have been more careful about what I drew...

Leander, I know I could have...I can make it up to you, all those

things-

No. You can't. Especially not THIS. And I don't even want you to fucking try. Take me back now, and I'll make sure he lets you go.

I can't do that.

It's your funeral.

Oberon screamed.

He screamed so hard and long and loud that only his hands pressed hard against his temples kept his skull from breaking into pieces.

Theren, with no understanding of what was going on, thought the sound heralded his own death, and he tried to scream too, crumpled on his hands and knees beside Oberon's chair. His screams came out in short crooked bursts. He could not draw enough breath to cry out as deeply as he wished to.

But Oberon was screaming words. "I killed him. He didn't WANT to leave me and I killed him I killed him..."

It degenerated into animal noise, and Oberon was kicking out with his feet, trying to push away the control panel, his chair, everything.

Theren understood something of this. Greatly daring, he knelt up, pulled Oberon close, forced the Septarch to look into his face. "What did you do? What did you do?" he demanded.

"Killed him...the device...killed him..."

Theren thought about that, for the briefest instant, and pleaded, "What? Which device? What did you do? Was he alive, when you left him?

"Alive...in the device...fitted, fitted..."

"Was he alive?" Theren demanded.

Oberon was sobbing, for a long moment, before he whimpered,

"Alive...yes. I think so."

"Then get up. We have to hurry," Theren ordered, to hell with his rank, and the chains tried to choke him as he dragged Oberon to his feet.

love is not love which alters when

Leander had not fully thought about death. Not before now.

He would die. He was mortal.

Oberon could never die, and he had nothing to fear, as far as some nameless retribution in an unknown afterlife.

That afterlife was rising dark and menacing before Leander, and he thought, I'll go to hell.

Hell. He saw himself, sitting in a mysterious abyss, with his mother. Alone. No kisses. No teeth. No merciless cock, no voice dark and casual and evil, whispering, Don't you want this? Don't you? And a careful, silky, insinuating texture, You do. You know you do, Leander, little killer, mine, mine, you know you want this. You always have.

An eternity. A safe empty eternity of wanting something he would never have. There would be no deadline, there would be no this-many-days-and-he-will-come-back-to-you. Only eternity. Only a void. Oberon was immortal. He would never die to join Leander in hell.

No.

He would not accept that.

He would not live...exist...without Oberon. He would not go back to that...aloneness. That...isolation. That vacuum without touch, without piercing merciless eyes, without warm vicious kisses.

Fury, and rage, and that part his father had called the devil in him, screamed out in defiance, and he pulled himself back from the place

that was a single burning line, and he was in his body again, aching, crying, choking on tears, his eyes pried wide open by metal hooks, the floor cold and hard under him, and the phallus still raping him, deep inside, and he clung to consciousness with a grim determination that pinned him into this place of pain, this place of paralysis and agony and humiliation, this place where he lay on the floor, everything hurting, and he thought, he'll come for me. I know he will.

There was a noise. Outside. Or inside, maybe. He couldn't be sure. He made a thin, warped cry for help, hoping against hope. There was a crooked savage flurry of something he couldn't understand, that might have been movement, and the image smashed into existence above him.

It was a dream. Yes. He had failed, after all.

Oberon was above him, sobbing like a woman with his hands wound in his own hair.

It's Lucifer. I was hoping it would be him.

The angel spoke, and the voice was familiar. "Leander? I didn't mean it, I didn't know...God, Leander, are you alive?"

Leander tried to nod his head yes. His head wouldn't move, and it was more a gesture of his eyebrows and his jaw, and that did all kinds of terrible things to his lips, his eyelids. His jaw tried to close, and his lungs started the rhythm of an unknown ritual, and everything was pink and orange and he couldn't breathe, really couldn't breathe.

Oberon did something to the piece in his mouth, and metal scraped his teeth and made him cry out, and then his mouth was free, and his jaw closed by itself and the pain was spreading back in dark wings to the base of his skull. He was choking, and Oberon turned him over, sobbing, and it tore at his eyelids. He thought, there's probably not much of them left, now. Just a meat fringe, hanging in my eyes, and he thought he was puking, but what he coughed up was slippery and stringy and red.

Punctured, he thought, and wondered what that meant.

Lung, he thought, and wondered what that meant, too.

Someone was turning him over, again, and he wanted to scream but he couldn't remember how. He looked up, and someone said, "Jesus,"

in a whisper that was a sculpture of shock and remorse.

It was Theren. He was almost naked, wearing manacles and shackles and a weird thing that was like strips of leather crisscrossing over his chest, and the funniest part was the scarf around his neck, like pictures of cowboys in ancient history books. Leander imagined himself laughing and saying, why the hell are you dressed like that? Then he thought he knew, and Oberon was fucking him, Theren, and a brittle crooked slash of jealousy made him try to frown, and that did things to the flesh around his eyes that made him wish to God he was unconscious again.

Part of him knew, you were right. He came for you. It's all right to lose it, now. But he couldn't. He still wasn't sure he would ever get it back again.

Theren was doing something gentle and excruciating to the hooks in his eyelids, both mercifully and quickly, and a blackred curtain began scraping across Leander's vision, making gritty strobe-light pictures. Oberon, kissing him, sobbing, kissing at his chin, his face, drawing crimson threads of whatever-it-was he had spit up into webs between them. "Don't die," he was saying, muffled and coming in waves, like a pulsar was sending the words to Leander's ears. "I didn't know you had nothing to do with it...don't die. Please."

Leander made a musical sound, a single note, that was supposed to mean don't cry and I love you and I forgive you, all in that awkward noise, and then everything collapsed again, into dark confusion, and this time he couldn't stop it, no matter how hard he tried.

A metal tray clattered down beside Oberon's elbow, nearly giving him a mechanical heart attack. The panic tried to tear him out of his skin. Outwardly, his left hand convulsed towards his forehead, and his right hand knotted onto the arm of the chair.

"Take it," Cayle ordered him, hoarsely, his eyes heavy and bruised. Oberon eyed the tray. A syringe, already loaded, and a cup of coffee that had sloshed muddy liquid onto the table. "I don't want anything," he mumbled, his head leaning again against his hand.

"Yes, you do. I need to talk to you."

Oberon covered his mouth with both hands, not hard enough, and the sound tore itself out of his voicebox, half-protest, half-sob. He let one arm fall limp, and he felt the prick of the needle. He stared up at the blank infirmary wall, and he picked up the cup and swallowed too much too fast, scalding his throat, his tongue. "What." he said, trying to be scoured out, empty, and failing.

Cayle took out the needle, and Oberon felt him rubbing at the puncture, heard him saying something in Egyptian, and he snapped, "English. Tell me."

"He's dying," Cayle said, quickly, clearly.

The cup hit the floor with a dull crack, and Oberon let his head fall forward, rubbed his forehead against the metal corner of the table, and the word dying struck him like a dull blade. He was not surprised. "Tell me," he said again, muffled against his hands, his hair.

Cayle drew in a deep, ragged, ugly breath. "Hemorrhaging. He's bleeding internally. Punctured lungs, and an intestinal rupture. He's got so many broken bones it would be faster to tell you which ones aren't broken. There's a fracture in his skull."

"When he's gone...I want you to fit me, and I want you to take everyone out of here, and set the self-destruct..."

"Oberon."

Oberon gestured in the air, not raising his head. The corner of the table was bruising his forehead. He rubbed harder, his hair in his mouth. "You heard me."
ice is forming

Oberon walked through his Sphere, moving like a mortal, slow and rusted. Some of his court saw him, and moved aside to let him pass. He ignored them. They didn't exist.

He let himself into the Gallery. It was dark, and empty, and still reeked of blood and pain. Camille's body was still there, limp and fading. It was standard procedure to leave everything exactly as he

placed it until he ordered otherwise. Camille was where he had dropped her. And Leander's cell.

He stopped at the door, breathing hard, his eyes closed. He gripped the bars, hard, trying to hold it in, and groped for the keypad and opened it by touch. He raised his hands, covered his eyes, fumbled his fingertips over his face, finally pressed them against his throat. Three parallel scars. He opened his eyes, and stepped inside. The smell wrapped around him like an attack, terror and sex and the deep ocean-scent that meant a traumatic wound. Under all of that, the soft orange scent of Leander's skin, his breath, his hair. Oberon put his hand over his mouth, made a sound that was almost choking.

The device was scattered on the floor, carelessly, where he and Theren had dropped it. It scared him to look at it. He crouched, took his hand from his mouth, touched it. It was freezing cold, so heavy, and he had wrapped his fragile, innocent Leander in this atrocity, for something he hadn't even intended to do.

He stood up, shaking, still choking, and stepped over it and sat on the edge of Leander's bed, gasping, his eyes trapped in the angles of the jawpiece. He stared at it for a long time. He was thinking a thousand things. I should have hit him, that first night. That would have been one more thing to remember. I should have taken him to Freya 8, to the art museum there. I should have ASKED him what happened.

He lay down, on his side, knees drawn up. He reached over, picked up the device, and pulled it onto the bed. He had to loosen it almost twice over again to get the corset around his chest. He felt his heart bang into his sternum once, metallic and agonized.

The door to the Gallery chimed.

He'd locked it from the inside. He was working at the buckles on the right side. He ignored it.

There was a hiss-snap. An energy gun. The alarm went off. He ignored that too. Cayle forced the door open and came inside. He saw what Oberon was doing, and snapped, "That's ridiculous."

"You'll have to help me with it," Oberon told him. He didn't even bother to sit up. "I can't do all of it by myself. And then bring him in here. I want him with me. Take everyone out and set it to explode in one week. You can take anything with you that you want. I don't need any of it." He'd managed the right side himself, and was working on the left. His hands were shaking.

"Oberon, I never said it was hopeless."

It took a minute for Oberon to translate that. Then, hardly daring, he raised his head.

Leander had discovered he was able to fly.

There was none of the grinding effort it took to fly in dreams, none of the sense of struggling very slowly through very thick air. He simply willed himself to move.

His ribs didn't hurt anymore, and he didn't seem to need to blink any longer. He was well. He had healed.

He had to find Oberon, he would want to know about this. He had been so upset before, so worried. Leander had to find him, to tell him, right away.

This new flying ability seemed to work exactly the way the surveillance system did. Leander had no sooner thought Oberon's name than the Sphere flashed into dizzying motion around him, and he was in a room he had never seen, floating above a group of people huddled busily around a table. He recognized Cayle. He tried to call out to him, and he heard a sound like static, and none of the people below him seemed to notice it.

Cayle stepped back then, gesturing imperiously, his mouth moving. There was no sound. Or, rather, there was, but Leander wasn't exactly able to hear it. It was on the other side of an invisible wall.

He tried to tell them to talk louder, and he made that static sound again, and the figure lying on the table moved, as though startled. It was Oberon, lying on his stomach, and he tried to raise his head. He seemed to be dazed, drugged, and he looked straight into Leander's eyes, before Cayle pushed him down again, adjusted something on a nearby control panel.

There was a flash of color, around Oberon's head, and he lay still again. They're hurting him. He's sick again, and they're hurting him. And I'm stuck up here next to the goddamned ceiling.

Leander shouted, this time, furious and outraged, and a monitor

shattered below him, sending the people into a frenzy of motion. They were gaping and waving like mimes, and Leander tried to move closer. He couldn't. Some kind of current was pushing him up towards the ceiling, and he would descend a foot or two, and drift back up again.

Goddamn it!

He was trying to understand it. There was a field of colors surrounding everyone down there, even a thin dull green one around some of the machines. Oberon's was the brightest, but it was darkening, slowly, flaring less, until it was a dull magenta membrane that didn't move at all.

Cayle was watching a computer display. He nodded, and took a terribly long needle, smeared something orange on the back of Oberon's neck.

They were bringing in another stretcher. Leander didn't want to look at it, but he could no longer control his eyes. It was himself, his own body, bruised and waxen.

One of the men did something to his discarded body, and there was a blinding noise, or light, or impact, and he was falling.

No, I'm TIRED of all this fucking being unconscious, he tried to tell them, furious, but he was in his body again, and his mouth was too heavy to move. He'd lost the trick of shattering glass, too.

"Leander, listen to me. I know you can hear me," Cayle was saying, somewhere behind him. "You're going to be perfectly all right, but you might feel...different...for a while."

Oberon woke up with a knife embedded in the nape of his neck and sand in his eyes. He was in a hospital bed, and Cayle was standing over him.

"I want you to get up and come with me. I want you to see him."

See him. Leander. Yes. "I can't."

"Yes. You are," Cayle told him, pulling at him.

They passed through a room with four beds. Three of them were

empty. Theren was in the last one, his face loose with drugs, his arm bandaged. Oberon glanced at him, pressed closer to Cayle. "No," he said, and it didn't mean anything. He had done what he had to, and all of this was his fault anyway. He couldn't even figure out where he had gone so wrong. He knew the beds behind him weren't empty at all. Felicity was there. And Camille.

Cayle felt him stiffen, and he pulled harder at the Septarch's arm. "He's in here," he said, and Oberon was pushed through an open door. He turned, already knowing what would happen. Cayle didn't follow him. The door closed behind him.

captive child

Leander awoke from a bright soft dream of roses and some kind of half-woman, half-painting hybrid. She had looked at him with gentle eyes and violet hair and whispered, It's hard to be young.

Yes, but I have no choice, he'd whispered back.

He loves you, she'd said, and faded into watered-down colors that had made him cry, and then, there had been a dark chemical spiral.

Then, a white geometric room.

Then, the worst headache he had ever had in his short strange life.

He closed his eyes briefly, turned his head, gritted his teeth against vertigo and opened his eyes again.

Oberon was sitting in a chair beside his bed, his head propped on his hand, sleeping. His face was no longer painted, but his skin was still parchment-pale, and there were new tense lines at the corners of his mouth, at the edges of his eyes. He was still smeared with blood and dirt, and his hair was filthy. He made a quick frown in his sleep, and a thin frightened sound deep in his chest.

"Hey," Leander said. His voice was a torn croak, and it hurt like hell to try and talk. "Oberon?"

The Septarch woke up as if an explosion had startled him awake. Confusion made his eyes blank, until he focused and saw Leander looking at him. He didn't speak. He exhaled, very slowly, and just stared back.

"I've never really seen you without makeup."

Oberon stared at him.

"Are you still mad at me?"

"Are you okay?"

"I guess I feel awful. My head is killing me. What happened?"

Oberon wasn't listening to any of that. He stood up, and walked towards the bed with a look on his face that made Leander cringe back into the mattress. "You are, you're still mad..."

"No," he said, very softly. "No." He was touching Leander's face with his fingertips, tracing his mouth, his eyebrows, the line of his jaw. "They told me you would die. We had to do it. There was no other way to--"

"Do what?" Leander caught his hand. He didn't like his tone of voice, not at all. "What did you have to do?"

"Change. Change you. Beautiful you," Oberon murmured. "I missed you. So much. I thought you'd never wake up."

"What did you change?" Leander demanded, frantic now, close to tears. He touched his own face, looked at his hands. Nothing, no difference except bruises and the aching itch of an IV taped to his wrist.

"You're...they copied...some of, what was done to me. You're...like me, now."

Leander was shaking. "My eyes--"

Oberon was stroking his neck, sitting on the edge of the bed now, and he caught up the boy's hand in his own. "Your eyes are fine. Still green. There wasn't any reason to replace your eyes," he said.

"I'm...immortal?"

"As immortal as I am, whatever that means."

"I won't age?"

"No. Not ever."

Leander covered his mouth. Oberon pulled his hand away, and saw that the boy was smiling.

"Can you...get up?"

"I think so." Leander sat up, slowly, and Oberon put his arms around him, pulled him close. And here were the kisses he had wanted so badly, and there was some difference, now, in the flesh of his mouth, electricity, or magnetism.

A creature like myself.

"It's like...I can read your mind...through your tongue," Leander said between kisses, trying to raise his own arms. The IV in his wrist ached, and he pulled it out, irritated, left the needle stripped and leaking clear fluid on the bedcover.

"Can you? What am I thinking?"

Leander closed his eyes, like a medium reaching for unwilling spirits. "You...need...something..." he managed, struggling to find words for something that was wordless. "It isn't sex, and you're afraid to ask for it."

Oberon pulled away from him, startled, almost afraid, even. Too close. Too much. "Leander."

"Ask me," Leander whispered to him, pleading. "I'll give you anything you want."

Anything. He tried to remember the last time anyone had given him anything. Other than this boy. There was nothing, no memory of anything freely given. All his memories were of things taken, and broken.

He searched for words, any words. "When you....in the Gallery, you said-"

He was struggling, and Leander bailed him out of it. "I know what I said."

Silence between both of them, threatening to close this doorway before either of them stepped through.

"Did you mean it?" Oberon said, and more than anything in his life he wished he had not asked that question. There was too much at stake behind the answer.

"Yes."

Yes. Then. Before you tried to kill him.

"Do you mean it still, after I-"

"Yes," Leander told him.

Oberon was shaking. "Would you...I didn't, before—"

"I love you," Leander said again, quietly.

Shaking. There was nothing in him, no part of his throat or lips that knew how to answer that.

He was bleeding again, from his eyes.

He leaned over, to kiss his lover again, and whispered, "Read my mind."

one week later

cardinal sin

Leander crept out of bed with nerve-scorching care, and stood waiting. Oberon didn't move, and the rhythm of his breathing did not change.

Leander dressed himself in darkness. He looked back towards the bed one more time, and tiptoed to the door.

Oberon kept himself still until he heard Leander leave, and he laughed to himself, very softly, before he got up and went to the computer.

Paul had dozed off into a nightmare.

He was behind the wheel of his electrocar, and it was going faster and faster, and nothing he did made it stop. There was nothing beyond the windows, only a not-quite solid blackness that moved like thick greasy smoke.

I just fucked your son, Paul, said a rasp of a voice beside him. The Septarch was sitting in the passenger seat, with a crossbow in his hands. His face was luminous in the darkness, with a thin green glow like the light of putrescence, and his teeth were too long, the color of chrome. Oberon held up his hand, semen dripping from his fingers, and threw it into Paul's face. He screamed, the sound dreamflat and useless, and when he put his hands to his face they came away wet and red.

The sound of the door opening startled him awake.

He looked up, his heart drumming hard, still half-in the dream, rubbing his fingers together to prove to himself that they weren't really wet at all.

What he saw stopped his breath, latched it cold and solid under his ribcage.

It was Leander.

He was moving exactly as Oberon had, walking into the gym a million years ago, his steps seamless, his motions as smooth as if his joints had been oiled. He was wearing one of Oberon's shirts as a dress; black velvet shot through with threads of silver, chrome at shoulders and waist. He had painted his lips and eyes himself, with black kohl, done quickly and quietly while the Septarch lay sleeping in the sable bed behind him.

"God," Paul said weakly, unaware that he had said it out loud.
"Leander."

Leander stopped, a foot from the bars, stood utterly still, staring. "You're not wanted here." he said, very quietly. "You have nothing to do with me, any more."

And Leander laughed.

It was a hard, sharp, cold sound, too large and ugly for such a young throat. Leander leaned his head back, deliberately, exposing the wounds. He had cut them open again. Three horizontal red slashes.

Paul gasped, horrified. One blinding truth was crashing through his mind: he's so different.

"Leander, I know I could have...I can make it up to you, all those things-" he said, frantic, the same faded promises.

"No."

"On Earth...there are people who could help you..."

Leander came closer, grasped the bars, making a face that was too heavy and dark to be called a grin. "What makes you think I would let you take me back to that?"

"So what exactly do you think you're going to do?" Paul snapped, angry now, and more frightened than he had ever been in his life "Do you think he'll just let you live here? As his...his.."

"Go ahead and say it," Leander told him. "His whore. That's what you're thinking, isn't it?"

"Leander, you're not thinking clearly. You're not in your right mind."

"Oh, yes. I am. I finally am," Leander said, showing his teeth again.

"It won't last. You know what he's like. What will you do when you're not his new game anymore?" Paul said, desperate now, and afraid it was obvious how desperate he really was. "When you're too old for him? What then?"

"You're wrong," Leander hissed at him, his mouth hard, his eyes gleaming. "Want a story? Here's one for you. He almost killed me because of your little rescue. By the time he found out I never wanted to leave I was almost dead."

Paul closed his eyes, opened his mouth to deny any or all of this.

"One synthetic lung. Most of my ribs have been replaced. And then, implants. They regulate everything. Every hormone, every chemical, metabolism. I'm almost a machine. And anything that breaks gets... replaced." Leander's hand had gone to his chest, where the scars were still smoothing over. "I won't ever be too old for him. Not anymore. I'm just like him, now. And that's what I've wanted since...since I knew it was possible. I suppose I have you to thank for this."

"How long do you think you have? Forever? It's not you he loves, Leander. It's that body of yours, and what you let him do to you--"

"And neither one of those will ever change," Leander turned away from Paul, and eyed the control panel for the cell in a way that Paul found distinctly unsettling. "You. I know you. I know what you're like. I know you'll never understand this, the life I have now, and you'll never leave me to it. You're a threat to me."

"Leander, what are you thinking about?" Paul said, very quietly. "I don't know what he's done to you, I can't imagine what would make you think I'm dangerous to you--"

"I didn't say that," Leander said, too casually. "I said you're a threat. You're not dangerous. Not yet. And I don't think I'll give you the chance to change that."

Oberon turned up the audio on his computer. He leaned closer to the screen, scarcely breathing.

Would he?

Paul was prattling on beside him, some incoherent patchwork about trauma and stress and Jesus and Leander doing this because Paul hadn't been attentive enough as a father, and he wasn't acting like himself because of Soren's death, and once they were back on Earth this would all fade away like a dream, just a bad dream, and didn't that sound nice?

Leander studied the controls, feeling the familiar Tri-Six mentality

settle over him, the specific mindset that solved technopuzzles, cracked codes, figured passwords out with an ability that was almost psychic. This little panel was child's play for someone who had hacked the Prime Minister's personal computer and gleefully read his mail for two months. Simple.

There was a voltage gauge, and a button. That was all there was to it. His fingertips tingled. He was humming to himself, an ancient song about a red door painted black.

Paul was crying now. The noise was distant, irrelevant. He seemed to be saying Leander, what are you thinking? Over and over. Leander ignored it. It was easy to ignore.

He set the voltage as high as it would go. He was sure it wouldn't take that much, but you had to be safe. There was no point in having to do it all over again. Besides, he was sleepy, and he wanted to be back in Oberon's warm velvet bed, done with this mess of detention blocks and electrified cells.

"When you see my Mom," he said to the inconvenience sobbing in the cell behind him, "Tell her I love her and I miss her, and I'm very happy here."

He pushed the button.

A vast thrumming traveled from his fingertip up his arm, into his teeth.

Paul made a crazy, metallic screech, like he was screaming through a mouthful of iron filings. Leander turned to watch him, his face empty. It was interesting. He kept convulsing long after his eyeballs had ruptured, and his hair smoldered and burst into flame. Leander waited a moment or two longer, then reached over and switched the current off.

Paul's skin had cracked in places, and was weeping colorless fluid. Smoke drifted up from his mouth, the empty sockets of his eyes. The smell was terribly strong, sweet and thick. The only thing that ruined it was the odor of charred cloth.

Leander waited, until he was sure Paul was dead. He nodded to himself, turned and left the jail.

Oberon's hands were still shaking, and he was aching everywhere, drawn into furious knots by an appetite he guessed was lust. And triumph. Lots and lots of that. He had won.

Leander was his.

He shot up, not heroin this time, and by the time Leander came back in, reeking of fire and flesh, he was lying in the bed again, the computer off and silent.

He didn't pretend to be sleeping. He watched Leander undress. "Is everything all right?" he asked, softly, once he trusted himself to speak.

Leander nodded. "Yeah. Everything is perfect." He picked up a cloth from the dressing table, meaning to wipe off the makeup.

"Leave it," Oberon said, and he was smiling in spite of himself.

Leander put the cloth down, closed his eyes. "You know."

"Yes."

"Are you mad?"

He sat up, leaned over and pulled Leander into the bed. "Do I look mad?" he asked, smudging the boy's lipstick with his fingertips. He buried his face in the boy's hair, inhaled deeply. "You smell...wonderful."

perdition

The door into the hospital ward opened and closed, almost soundlessly, but Theren heard it. He lay as still as he could, and kept his face turned to the wall. "I know it's you. Come to take me to the jail, or directly to the throne room? Or maybe straight down to the torture chambers, if you—"

There was a clatter that he recognized, that froze his rehearsed last words. His plate armor, hitting the floor. He turned, startled. Oberon was standing in front of the pile of armor, holding something like a small silver briefcase. Theren was so convinced he would be all in black that he actually saw it for an instant, and he closed his hands

into hard frightened fists, closed his eyes, opened them again. Oberon was wearing dark brown vinyl, the looped cross on his right shoulder in gold. Not black. Not killing clothes. He looked pointedly at the stack of armor and ordered, "Get dressed."

Stunned, Theren could only shake his head. "You're crazy," he whispered, finally. "You're just...crazy."

Oberon considered that, tilting his head, deliberately overdramatic, making a big show of analyzing this remark. "Irrelevant," he decided. "Cayle told me you're fine. One little bite. Synthskin and antibiotics. Perfectly fit for duty. Now put your uniform on."

Theren laughed, very close to hysteria. "Don't you get it? I'd rather die than be your guard."

Oberon nodded, chewing on the inside of his cheek, as though he had expected that exact response. He sat on the edge of the empty bed across from Theren, and began keying a code into a tiny keypad on the little silver case. Theren sat up, watching him, expecting a bomb. Or worse—knives, needles, venomous insects. It could be anything at all.

The Septarch opened the case. It clicked, and Theren flinched, gritting his teeth. There was a soft pressurized hiss, and a plume of white smoke. Liquid nitrogen.

God, no. It's a bluff. It has to be. He can't actually be this evil. He just can't.

Oberon waited, then removed a very small glass vial. A medical specimen jar, with a neat computer-chip label. He held it up, grinned, and looked over at Theren. "Recognize this?"

Theren could only stare. He felt himself freeze inside, and he wrapped his arms around himself, shuddering. He's been unconscious for hours, maybe even days. They'd had plenty of time to get all the information they needed.

The room was spinning. He couldn't breathe. He was drowning in terror. "No. You can't. You couldn't," he managed, his voice fragile, scorched.

"It's a genofile," Oberon told him, sounding extremely pleased with himself. "Your DNA. And the program disks are safe on Moloch where you'll never reach them." His mouth twitched, as though he was resisting laughter, or pretending to. "Welcome to life as a regen,

Theren One. Death is no longer an option for you.”

“No,” Theren said again, staring at the vial as though he could see hell spinning inside it. Theren One. He’d die and wake up in a regen chamber. Brand new. Again and again and again.....

“Here are your choices,” Oberon said, “Immortality as my guard, or as my guinea pig. Choose.”

Theren stood, his eyes still nailed to the silver case, stumbling, groped for his armor with numb fingers, and began to put it on.

Oberon chewed his lip, watching until he was satisfied. He picked up the genofile case and stood to leave. “Camille’s body is still in the Gallery. Take care of that,” he said over his shoulder.
perspective

"No one has ever been here, except for me. I killed the men who built this place." Oberon said, standing in front of a round door.

"What's inside?"

"I couldn't tell you. It's something you have to see for yourself," Oberon told him, and the door spiraled open like the iris of one of his mechanical eyes.

The air that rushed out was cold and damp, laden with a sweet thick smell that Leander thought he recognized. "Is it...a crypt?"

"No. Come inside."

Leander took Oberon's hand, and the door blinked closed behind them.

It was darker than midnight in hell.

"Where are you?" Leander said, whispering instinctively, as though he were in a church.

"Hang on...running lights..."

A circle of light blinked on at floor level, defining the walls of the room. Leander took a step towards them, and felt Oberon grab his arm hard. "Don't move. You'll fall."

"Fall?"

"It's a shaft. Here--"

A row of lights just in front of him, marking a path forward.

There was a strange silken rustle, high overhead.

"What is it?"

Oberon keyed in one last code, one he had never used, and took Leander's hand. "Walk forward. Careful. There's a platform at the end."

Leander did so, Oberon behind him with his hand on the boy's shoulder. "Where are we?"

"Watch."

There was a vast scrape, an electronic whine--

"Jesus, Oberon, is it--"

"Watch," Oberon ordered him. "Look up."

The dome of the roof was sliced in half by a single crack of light. It began to hinge open, like an observatory. Outside, the orange sky was streaked with vivid green, peacock blue, sulfur yellow.

"It's sunrise," Oberon said, beside him.

And Leander opened his mouth to speak, and couldn't. The noise. The noise, he thought.

They were flying out into the sunrise. Hundreds of them, thousands, maybe even millions. Some were invisible specks, others bigger than both his hands.

Butterflies.

It took forever. The swarm of them was almost thick enough to leave the two of them in darkness again, and it thinned so slowly it seemed at first to be an illusion.

Finally, the last of them was free, down to the final stragglers, and the sky was gaping open above them.

"Look," Oberon said again. "Down. On the floor."

Leander looked. His eyes refused to make sense of it and he went down on his hands and knees, peering over the edge of the platform.

"God," he whispered, and then he felt the platform jolt under him, and begin to descend.

wings

"I can't--"

Oberon was holding Leander, like one would hold a young child, with Leander's legs around his waist. "You can."

"Oberon...they're worms."

"Yes. And you're immortal. What will they do, kill you?"

Leander clung harder. "Please..."

"Leander, if you want to lie down, you are going to have to touch the floor."

Leander laughed, surprising himself. "That sounds like a fucked-up version of the kind of thing teachers have on their desks on plaques."

"Put your feet down."

"I'll freak, I mean it--"

"Put your feet down," Oberon ordered.

"I'll step on them."

Oberon sighed, exasperated. "Put your feet on my feet, then."

Leander did, quivering, still clinging hard to Oberon's shoulders, then his hands, then only one hand. He couldn't stand to squish any of them, so he sort of shoved them aside with the toe of his boot, shuddering, until he had cleared two spaces for his feet.

"Will they bite me?"

"No. Not these. The ones that bite are up there," Oberon told him, pointing at the ominous portals set around the walls.

"Jesus--"

"Leander. Leander," Oberon said, holding Leander still and forcing him to look into his eyes. "This is the last thing. The very last thing. And you will be unmade."

"This is worse than the paddle. They're worms. Don't you understand that worms are gross?"

Oberon kissed Leander's cheek, his chin, his neck. "I love you."

"Don't, you're cheating, don't you dare--"

"I love you...love you..."

"Goddamnit," Leander said, and let go of Oberon's hand. "I suppose you want me to sit down, now."

Oberon sat down himself, looking up.

Leander sighed.

He sat down and lay back, all in one motion, to get it over with. It was cold, and wet, and soft in the most awful way.

He kept his eyes closed.

He felt Oberon lie down beside him, pull him close, turn him over so that he was lying on top. "Leander..."

"You made me lay in those worms when you were going to make me lay on you anyway? Fuck off," Leander said, giggling.

"Leander, look at me."

"I can't. I'm laying on you."

Oberon pushed Leander up until he could look into the boy's eyes. "Kiss me," he said, trying to communicate other words with his eyes.

Leander saw the attempted telepathy, but he was oblivious

(he can't mean)

to its meaning. He put his mouth against Oberon's and felt a worm against his right pinky finger. It felt like the tongue of a corpse

tongue, and he knew damn well he could read Oberon's mind, now, and he couldn't

(mean)

and Oberon didn't kiss him. Exactly. He moved his mouth, and made a soft strange sound, and moved against the floor, made some adjustment with his spine.

(jesus)

Leander couldn't ignore that, couldn't even begin to pretend to ignore it, and this was not entirely new, and he kissed Oberon, kissing mean but teasing to get him back for this awful worm business

and Oberon moved again, and it was a moan this time, and he put his hands on Leander's back in a new way, just touching with his fingertips, and pushing his hips up. There were worms in his hair.

Leander couldn't stand it. He was drowning in confusion, in conflicting images. He was in a room full of worms. The sky, the open sky was above him, with the sun shining green and pure into this crypt, into this nest of gleaming worms

and the first cylinder clicked, jolted, and engaged, moving towards vertical

and Leander pulled his mouth away from Oberon's and leaned back, leaned his head back until he was staring straight up into the blinding sky

and Soren was there, with hair the color of new leaves and eyes the color of his

and the butterflies, there were hundreds of them, and I was

and God laughed, and cobwebs covered Leander, like rain, except they didn't burn his skin. He was in a cocoon, and he couldn't move, and his bones were changing

and Oberon pulled him back down again, kissed him again, sucking hard on his tongue until the sky was forgotten, and Leander kissed back.

Oberon moved his mouth to the boy's neck, biting in frantic wet hunger, and said in his ear, "Fuck me."

Leander shook his head, his hands wound hard in Oberon's hair, and fumbled one of them free to struggle at his clothing

and this was more, so much more

and Oberon's hands closed around his, and Oberon whispered, "No, you fuck me."

understood. more

"No, I can't," he whispered back, desperate, his spine still moving, the sky still crashing in above them.

"No...you have to...no one ever has, not since him, and you have to, you have to unmake me, Leander, because..."

i AM you

"...because I am you," Oberon finished, his eyes closed.

because the light will damage them eventually.

"God," Leander said, speaking to the sky, but looking down at Oberon. The light was so bright he could see the gleam of it, on the implants

under Oberon's eyelids. Their hands were moving, in synch, the perfect machine, alpha and omega

This is the last thing. The very last thing. And you will be unmade.

and he saw Paul and Theren, somewhere in a vast cage, and Lucius was outside the cage, laughing and mocking, grown to the size of a castle, the cage small enough to fit in his clawed hand

and Paul and Theren were sobbing, knowing that it was the predators and only the predators who were truly FREE

and he could. Fuck him. Oh, yes, he could, and it

(was)

equinox of the gods

"Don't you ever get tired of this?"

Oberon considered. He was sitting in his office, in his desk chair, with Leander over his knees. He had covered the boy in packing tape and was ripping off each strip with varying degrees of speed and violence. Leander's eyes were unfocused, and his skin was striped with strawberry lines from the past hour or so of this treatment.

"We've only done this one other time. And that was a different kind of tape," Oberon told him, plucking at the corner of a piece of the tape that was across Leander's shoulderblade.

"Not this game. I meant...this. Living in the Sphere, and killing slaves, and doing heroin..."

Oberon ripped off the tape, grinning. "Why would I get tired of it?"

Leander choked his way through a moan, and said, "Don't you ever want...more?"

He considered again. The question was terribly familiar, but he couldn't place where he'd heard it before, even though he remembered the correct answer. "Is there more?"

Leander covered his mouth with his hand, and smiled.
"There's...Earth."

armageddon

Isaiah Kel Moriann had been Prime Minister of Earth for fourteen years, three months, and twelve days when it happened.

He was sitting in the environmentally-controlled, completely automated office that had been built for him a year earlier, in a taupe leather chair that was computerized to adjust itself to his posture. He was drinking coffee imported from Telauria Prime, and watching a sermon given two days ago in the District once known as Washington, in the country once known as America. It was about the evils of the underground culture, the complex system of secrets and supplies and drugs and information that persisted no matter what measures the State took to obliterate it.

Maybe he could arrange a listing of everyone convicted of any kind of psychological aberration. Require them to be observed and tested weekly, implanted with artificial glands to release sedatives and antipsychotics automatically. With an encoded program to release lethal poison if anyone attempted to remove the implant, he thought, and he had just decided to mention it to the Cardinal when a single monitor in the vast array spread out before him abruptly went black.

He glared at it, tapped a few keys on his armrest. Annoying. It was a minor thing, a system that showed planetary weather systems. He never even really used the thing. The point was that it wasn't working.

And it didn't work, no matter what he typed.

And another monitor over his head went black, too.

Then two of them, the larger ones that displayed the military launch logs, went to black at the same instant.

Three more.

Twelve.

All of them.

"Shit," he muttered, and keyed on his communication. "Jared, there's-

The chaos of noise that exploded out of the speakers on either side of his head made him scramble out of his chair. He stood there, staring at the speakers, vaguely holding his hands over his ears, and all around him the monitors collapsed into darkness like blinded eyes.

He was paralyzed by what he was hearing.

Apparently, down in Communications, there was a riot going on.

People were screaming. There was the crackling hum of some kind of electrical malfunction, and someone was shouting, "All down! It's all down! All of them! We have no surface to space capability....took out EVERY airport and spaceport....defense grid is out, it's fucking OUT BECAUSE the satellites are fucking space trash, he blew them into shrapnel before he was even in sensor range....the communication satellites are--"

There wasn't even a click. Just silence. And no button he pushed did ANYTHING at all. Including the one that opened his own door.

The Prime Minister stood there, paralyzed. After a long moment he wandered over to the vast window, transparent steel neatly covered with an opaque shield.

The key to open it, oddly enough, was the only one in the entire room that still worked.

He was looking out at the same grounds, perfectly manicured grass, priceless statues, gun mounts. And looming over it all was the sun.

And the edge of it was black. A tiny slice of the sun was BLACK.

And it was growing.

He stared up at this nightmare until the sun was blotted out, black as sack cloth, eclipsed by the Sphere of Light and Shadow.

There was a chime behind him, the signal of an incoming transmission, and he turned. A single monitor was blinking a green message at him.

GOG AND MAGOG

"God, no," he whispered.

The letters disappeared, and were replaced by a looped cross, over four green words.

HERE ARE OUR DEMANDS.

Comments

Name: Anonymous : 2010-02-08 18:05

I just read this entire thing in one sitting. You are an implausibly good writer.

24 Name: 19 : 2010-02-08 19:53

Um, thank you? I'm not sure how to feel about "implausibly." It is indeed mine, complete with flaws. :) Of all I have backlogged I thought this might suit you gurochan-dears the best, as "pg-13" as it is compared to later stuff. I wanted to get you out of Earth for awhile, as always. I hope I succeeded.

25 Name: REd : 2010-02-09 01:21

Flaws yes, but delicious flaws. Oh this is excellent work, entrancing and very well written. Extremely so as an original story. I could edit and remove it's mistakes, correct some sentences, but it'd be best to leave it by itself in all it's glory.

I daresay it outshines even your vaunted Schadenfreude.

Bravo, good sir, bravo!

26 Name: Anonymous : 2010-02-09 03:05

Started this at 11:50, just finished at 3:04 AM, SO glad you are still around here/

Loved the story and the bits with the eyes. Yum.

27 Name: Anonymous : 2010-02-09 17:17

How many times am I going to have tell you that I love you? If you keep up these wonderful stories, too many times to count. I loved distopian novels, but they always try too hard to push politics in your face. This was entertaining, hot, and not politically overbearing. In a word, great. The ending was a little short, and your style is a little rough, but it does not detract from the story. Your ability to move people emotionally is where these stories really shine, and I admire the pacing with which you do it. You also deal with a range of fascinating topics and elements that make your stories well rounded. All in all, I'd like to read more of what you've written, Guro or not.

TL;DR: Great work, keep it up, hope to see more, ETC.

28 Name: Feri : 2010-02-16 23:10

Your stories are always so well-written, even though there are flaws, and I like how you can write about a wide range of things and STILL make it sound beautiful/hot/awesome.

You never fail to impress me, 19, and I would love to see more of your work in the future.

29 Name: 19 : 2010-02-17 07:58

This is ancient. If I remember correctly, it's the second full-length novel I ever wrote. I was twenty or so when I finished it. Just a baby freak.

I can still be reached at thenineteen (at) hotmail.com and I am trying to check it more often. I got the Not So Killer Flu late last year and while running a very high fever deleted my entire mailbox. The benefit of that is when I open it there's a few dozen unread mails and not a few hundred, so I am less overwhelmed. The downside is I may have missed some mails. If anyone wrote me and did not receive a reply please write me again. My apologies.

If I ever manage to EDIT what I do, maybe I can smooth out the flaws. I live in hope. :)

I'm glad you dears are enjoying this. Massive life changes are occurring for me right now, hopefully for the better. My goals include a webpage and a printed Schadenfreude, which in theory should be followed by other books. I'm going to do my VERY best to make them very affordable.

30 Name: GirlyMonster : 2010-02-17 15:56

Oh my sweet perverted darkness, that was amazing. You're just as good an author as Laurell K. Hamilton, and R.A. Salvatore, and Terry Goodkind.

31 Name: Anonymous : 2010-02-17 23:32

What a guroless story

32 Name: Anonymous : 2010-02-18 01:15

> > 31

Cease thine trolling.

There's something so captivating about how you build up your story,

it just makes everything amazing. I still have to read the last chapter, but it's just been fantastic so far.

33 Name: Dr. Anon : 2010-02-18 13:21

If you DID have a book, I would most certainly purchase it. Actually, I would purchase two, as the first would certainly get messy.

I would revel in seeing more to this story, 19. Some of the dystopian stuff in it is pretty cliché, sure, but otherwise, it's great. Even the guard guy who is fighting to NOT like the main character is good. I really feel for him.

Thanks for being a good writer!

34 Name: Via : 2010-02-18 17:52

This is purely amazing. It's totally different from Schadenfreude, but that's wonderful, how deliciously rare it is to get such varying setting and plot and everything...Please publish soon.

35 Name: 19 : 2010-02-25 12:06

Of course it's cliché. It's a space opera. I love me some ridiculous sets and costumed supervillain and angst. Woot. :) Flash Gordon is probably a bigger influence on this than I'd like to admit. Fun. And the Edgar Rice Burroughs Mars books. Terrible silliness like that.

36 Name: Anonymous : 2010-02-26 07:48

I don't think I can write without rattling on and on and on, and I'll probably send a creepy fan mail when I get my brain back, but this. This was good. I liked your buildup, the care you put into setting the setting. It's very different from Schadenfreude, but wonderful just the same. I love the character development, especially how Oberon, with all his power and immortality, is so very vulnerable and rather bitchy.

I'll always weep for Theren and his fate. Even if he did try to pull the two apart, I can completely see /why/ he did it. And it burns.